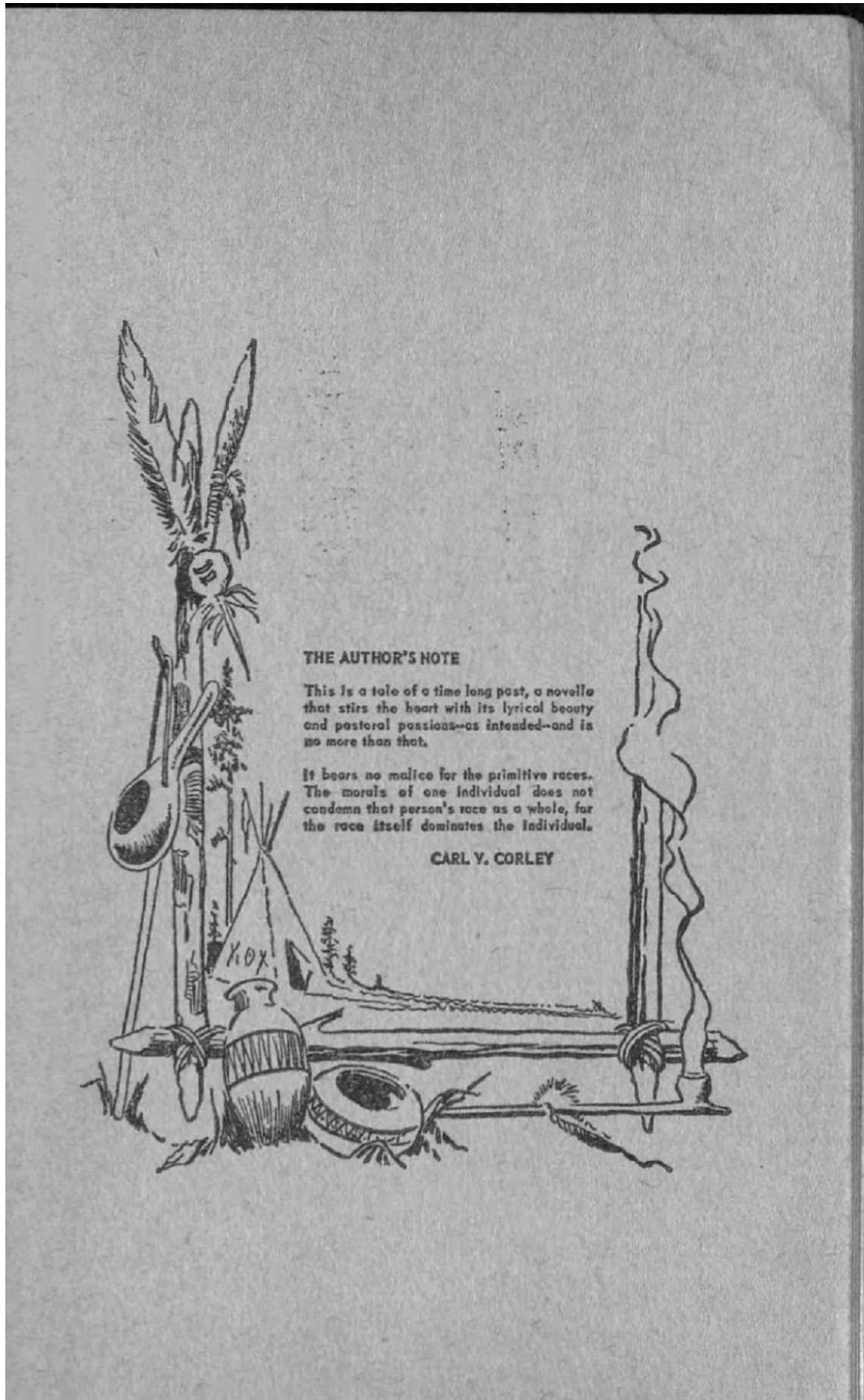


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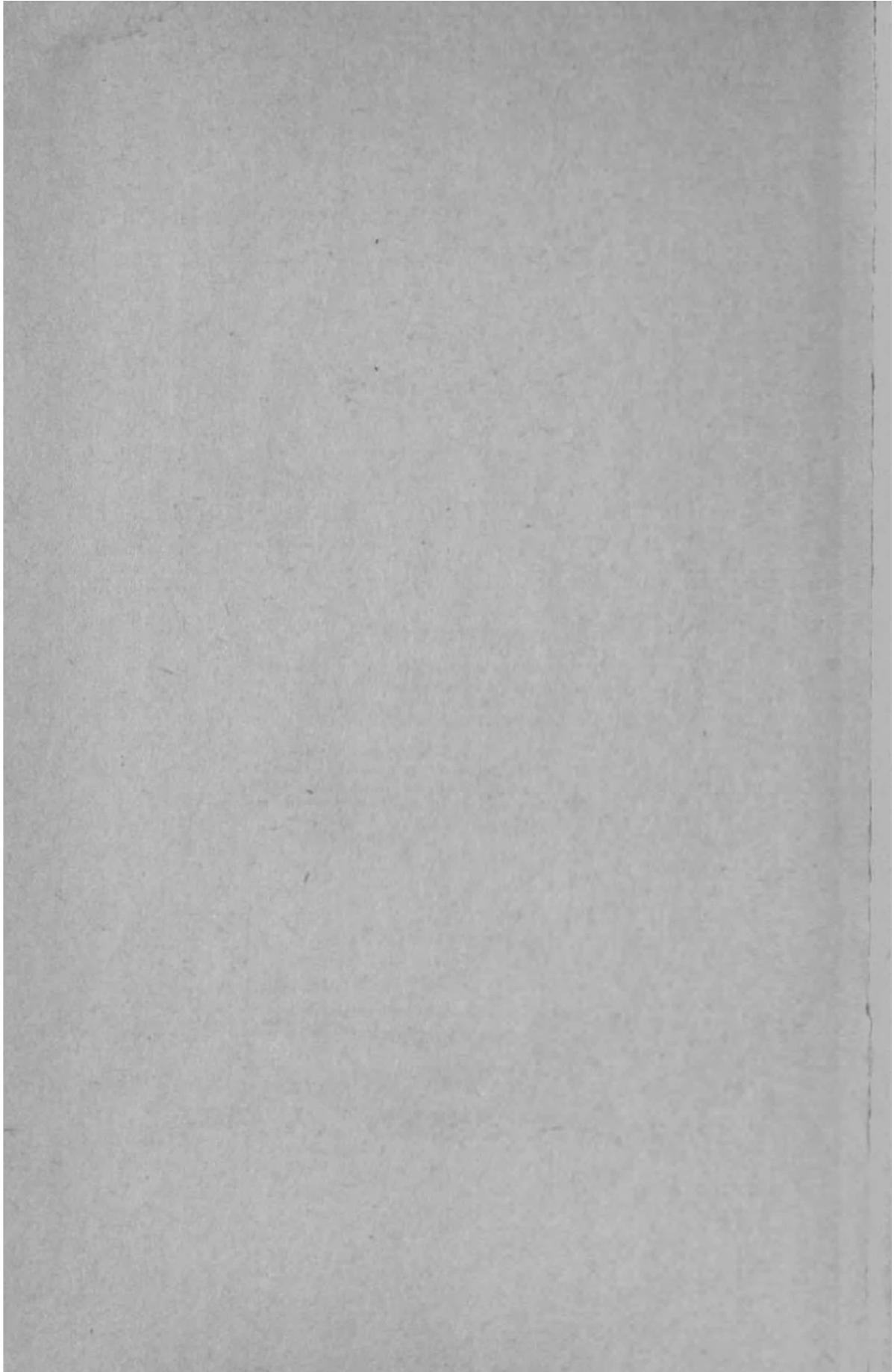


THE AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a tale of a time long past, a novella that stirs the heart with its lyrical beauty and pastoral passions-as intended-and is no more than that.

It bears no malice for the primitive races. The morals of one individual does not condemn that person's race as a whole, for the race itself dominates the individual.

CARL V. CORLEY



SKY EYES

by
Carl Corley

All characters and situations in
this book are fictitious

A PEC FRENCH LINE NOVEL

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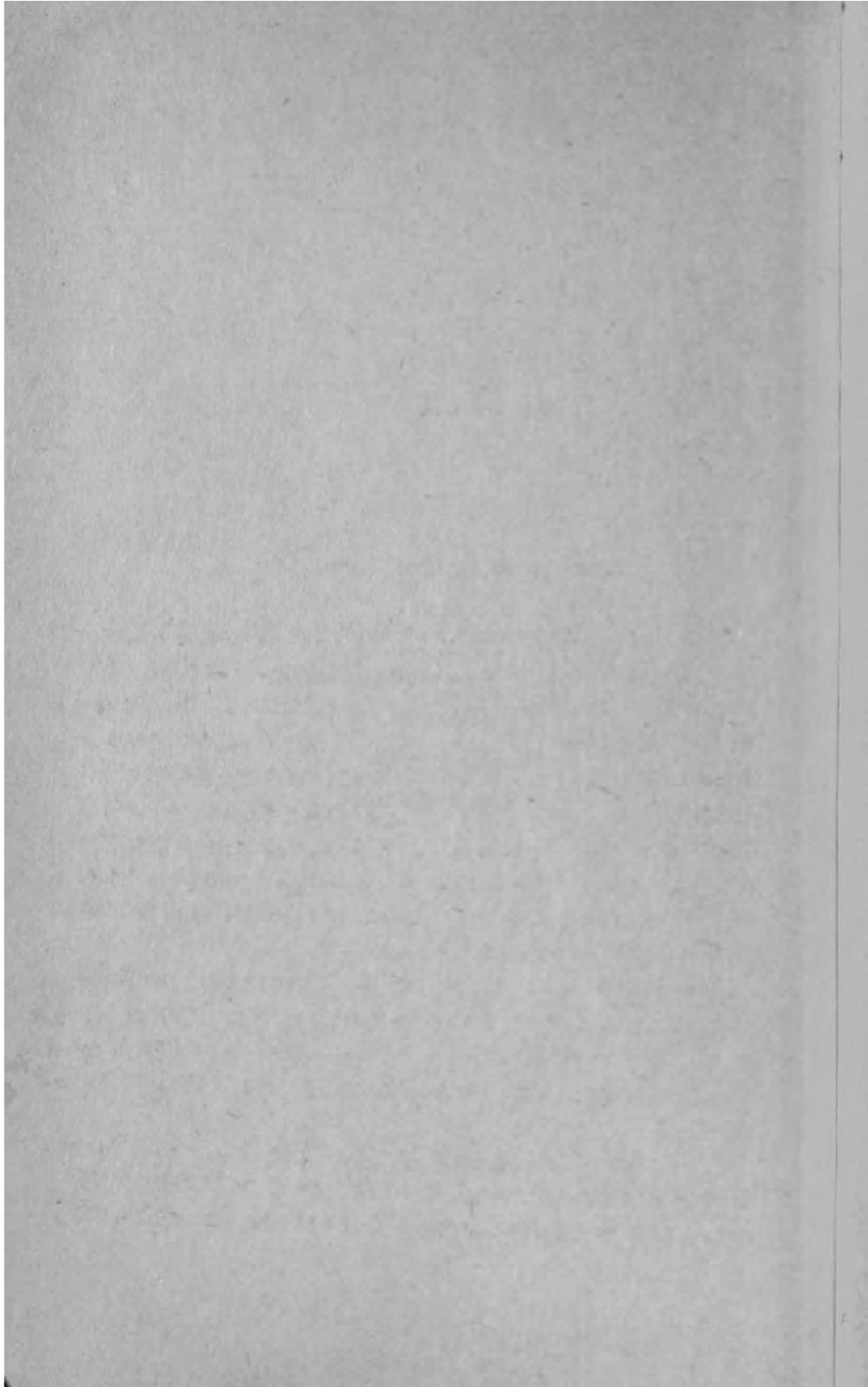
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Chapter One

Vik Alta slipped out of his varnished Wellington boots and his mustard-colored tights. He eased into the trough of hot water a little reluctantly, a little embarrassed by the rugged roustabouts who eyed him rakishly as they busied themselves with shaving, hair-trims, shining their foot-wear, and having their traveling regalia dusted of that fine Mississippi loam which settled persistently on every stagecoach traveler from New Orleans to Kentucky.

He lathered up, using an enormous wad of soap from hog-fat and lye, and watched curiously as the hot water, a pale green, bubbled down the length of the pine wood through and under the wall.

The trough was fed by the Pearl River. The water flowed through a sluice into a boiling pot and then emptied into the bathing trough. All

with the compliments of the *Les Fleurs Bluff* trading post, which accommodated weary travelers from the distant ports of Biloxi, New Orleans, Memphis, and far up as Atlanta.

And they all seemed to be here in this elongated room, thought Vik, as he took advantage of the tonsorial facilities. Mountain crackers, swamp Cajun and Tennessee hillbillies rubbed elbows (and behinds) with aristocratic cotton plantation kings, merchants and bankers.

The place was like a mad-house, or, rather, like a saloon on Saturday night. There was much hollering, drinking, laughing, joke telling, and many impatient commands to the little Negro they referred to as "Ice Cream" to shine their boots, brush their top-coats, to iron a damp shirt. Added to the noise was the rancid smell of unwashed male bodies, stale sweat, pelts, gun powder, tobacco, rum, lye soap, and cologne, all mixed with the steam from the hot water and thickened in quantity and potency.

What a drastic change from his theatre days in New Orleans, the little dressing room behind the stage, the marble bath, the shining glass decanters of perfumes, the fluffy white towels, the French waiter. But he didn't mind the savagery of this mob, actually. In fact, he curiously enjoyed the change, enjoyed roughing it, for he realized it was but a momentary interlude in his life. In another week, if his luck held out and there were no more Indian uprisings, he would be out of this primeval territory, traveling toward New York and embarked on a career with the Shakespearean acting group. It would be a

long awaited event. But God! He deserved this break! Acting, especially the classics, was not the best kind of life for a man of twenty four, or of any age, for that matter, unless he was on top, a recognized star. But, he shrugged, reveling in the hot water flowing past his tired, naked body, by next year of 1831, if he worked hard enough and sacrificed, he had an excellent chance of playing the lead in *Henry the Eighth*. Had not Baron Bonne of New Orleans said as much? And if anyone knew acting . . . the Baron knew!

Lost in his own thoughts, ignoring completely the motley crew who milled about, sloshing water as they scrubbed their mangy hides, Vik moved upstream where the water was yet clear, rinsed himself off and tried to lift himself out of the trough.

A huge, bronze hand was held down to him and, taking it in a firm grip, Vik was lifted up as easily as if by sleight of hand.

"Your arm pulling me," Vik said gratefully, "is like the Sunday school tale of Jesus Christ and Peter on the wild wet sea . . . me being Peter."

The man looked down at him, unexpectedly, as if to take notice if he was in earnest and, finding that he was, changed the subject of religion.

"Boy, you got the yellowest head of hair ah ever saw," he said, with admiration in his deeply masculine voice.

"I'm Swedish," Vik explained, tossing back his long blond locks with a careless shake of his head. "My father came from Katrineholm in

1810, came to the America's to make his fortune, and I be born in this emerald land, on the banks of the Mississippi."

"Saw only one other person with hair like that," the stranger added, his dark mellow eyes following Vik's every move, like a preying cat at a mouse hole. "That was a saloon at Natchez below the hill. A dancing woman. Said she used lye."

"No lye or no other concoctions blended this to the gold color that it is," Vik denied, taking up a rough towel and rubbing his naked arms. "It's the blending of nature and naught else," he finished flatly.

"Well, you're a strange one," the man said; "for these parts like a gum-tree leaf in Indian summer lodged in a black-thorn."

At that Vik turned and gazed at him, for the first time. The man towered over his five-foot-two height, broad of shoulders thick of biceps and forearms. He was stripped to the waist, and his hard, rounded chestplates were covered with a riot of wild, black, curly hair, almost like a mat. His nipples stood out, piercing, dark-toned like polished mahogany. He was wearing worn buckskins and boots, and the muscles of his thighs and calves showed, like the sinews of a panther through their coating of fur. The hair on his head was black, straight as a horse's mane, and brushed until it shone from the light in the pine rafters above. He was clean shaven, a rarity among these hill-country men who boasted beards, mustaches, or mutton-jaws and side-burns. His lips cut a clean, red line across his

face, as shapely as a woman's.

He was one of the handsomest men Vik had ever seen, especially when he smiled that lazy, indolent smile which seemed to be a habit of his, and his body, though powerfully dark, savagely strong, moved with an inner grace, almost like that of a prowling animal.

"I'm Vik Alta," he introduced himself, and, feeling something of protection in the shadow of this male giant, Vik thrust out an eager hand. "My destination is New York ... the classic stage."

The man gave him a ready glance. His dark, liquid eyes roved from the top of Vik's wheat-colored head to his water-soaked toes, all in the fleeting fraction of a second.

"Thought as much," he grunted, though he smiled. "I knew you wasn't one of the rough and readies. I'm Rafe Savage, territorial guide for the stage line. From Yalobusha way ... to Yazoo City."

Vik eyed him with growing interest.

"Will that be up the Natchez Trace?"

The man nodded. "So ... we ride the stage together."

"I'd like that," Vik said, and he meant it. Riding the stage up from New Orleans had been no picnic. Most of the travelers had only grunted when he attempted to engage them in conversation. It would be a relief having someone like this gallant Rafe Savage to sit beside him on the rickety stage, to talk to and keep his mind off the Indians ... those heathenistic apemen! Not that Vik had ever seen one. But he had heard

repeatedly what demons they were, and he shivered at the very thought of Indians.

"What's the matter?" Rafe asked, protectively concerned, "A cucumber-bur caught in your drying rag?"

"Just chilled standing here naked as the day I was born," Vik said, attributing his trembling at the thought of Indians to his embarrassing condition.

"Here . . . er . . . Vik, boy," Rafe said, taking the towel in strong brown hands and rubbing his wet chest and abdomen thoroughly. "Let me give you a helping hand. The stage will be in from Columbia in half an hour. You can't go to New York ass-naked!"

At that Vik turned crimson. But he allowed himself to be rubbed down, and the man took every liberty as if Vik were an animal being carefully groomed . . . and not a full-grown man exposed to the goggling eyes of all these filthy hillbillies.

"You're like a young colt," Rafe said, getting to Vik's inner thighs and around his rounded buttocks. "Strong and firm. You'll beget sons and daughters with strength, stamina. They won't be like these Mississippi crackers . . . their spirits broken from hard field labor before they're fourteen . . . with broken arches from following a plow barefoot, hump-backed from stooping in the cotton rows. Your sons will be like young fawns."

He slapped Vik playfully on the rump.

"Smooth as a lady's silk garter!"

He laughed, displaying two rows of even,

white teeth. His dark eyes smiled too, like two tiny lights down in a dark well.

Vik smiled back shyly, in that innocent Swedish manner of his, and a warmth flooded his being, a strange, inner warmth which made him feel that he had known this friendly man for a long time, instead of only a few minutes while exchanging brief, casual words.

In his travels Vik had found most Mississippians aloof, distant, a little hostile by nature. Even when they weakened their reserve and carried on a mild conversation with him they seemed to hold back, as if they harbored a secret that even threat of death could not reveal.

This Rafe Savage was different. But in what way? Vik was not sure. Warm. That was part of it. Rafe was warm. And in that warmth there was surely understanding. Both of these qualities made Vik realize, suddenly, that he needed to depend on Rafe, but for what ... Vik was not certain.

When they finished with their dressing he followed Rafe out of the bath house and stood with him for a moment on the front elevated gallery while they awaited the next stage.

The fort was set on a high bluff overlooking Pearl River which wound its way lazily through the autumn foliage like a sleepy snake. The breeze from the green water was cool and fragrant upon their faces. Gold and scarlet autumn leaves waved like gorgeous plumes in the tree tops, and the dark green of the sable pines shimmered in the distance. On the river, near the wharf, canoes and flatboats were moored in si-

lent groups. Dock-hands went to and fro like ants, loading a battered sternwheeler bound for Biloxi and the Gulf of Mexico. Guards rimmed the high towers of the fort, rifles at the ready, their eyes locked on the shimmering blue distance. Sentinels, their rifles at trail, walked their posts, a little wearily in the late afternoon light. At the far end of the gallery several women, coarse, weather-beaten, chatted as they waited for their destined stage, and in front, in the red dust of the road children played with fox hounds and pickaninnies.

Friendly Indians, decked out in white men's attire but with their blackhair still long like that of their Incan ancestors dragged in pole sleds tied to their spotted ponies. The sledges were loaded with pelts—fox, coon, rabbit, bear, deer—to be traded at the fort in sugar, seedcorn, tobacco, whiskey, brightly-patterned cloth and trinkets.

"Harmless urchins," Vik remarked, as he watched one Indian, a mere youth with a loin cloth tied over his trousers who was bringing an arm-load of gaudy-colored earthenware to sell to the waiting travelers.

"That one, yes," Rafe agreed, lifting is black, wide-brimmed hat with the beaten silver band and setting it over one eye in a cocky fashion. "He's a Pontotoc. His Pa was a white man. He's tame as a collie. But once we get beyond Madison County, into the Choctaw nation, things will perk up a bit. Got your shooting iron?"

Vik trembled again.

"Got my Derringer," he said, taking it out of

his wine-silk waistcoat. "Papa gave it to me on my eighteenth birthday."

"You couldn't snip off their balls with that!" Rafe said, with a know-it-all-smile, "What you need is a trusty Lefaucheux Brevete revolver."

Taking the pistol out of the holster strapped to his huge thigh, Rafe held it out for Vik to examine, the late sun glittering off the end of the long barrel. The gun was elaborate by Vik's conservative Swedish standards, wrought with filigree, as delicate as lace.

"It looks dangerous!" Vik said, in awe of its shiny beauty.

"It *is* dangerous," Rafe said, returning it to its holster, "Just pointing it at an Indian scares hell outa them. Then they start running. All you can see of them is their ass-holes and their elbows."

Vik went crimson.

"Eh . . . do you think we will encounter some of them?" he asked, changing the subject quickly.

"Don't fret, Vik boy," he answered calmly. Then he frowned, his face like the sun going under a cloud. He put his arm around Vik's shoulder. "Ah'll look out for you, and be right beside you every step of the way. Ah'll do the shooting for the both of us."

There was that warmth again!

Vik was puzzled. He had never met a man quite like this Rafe. But he dismissed the reflection hurriedly as he considered the Indians. Because of the Indians he had almost cancelled his trip to New York. He would have done so, had

he not sacrificed so much of his time and energy in the Tabaray's theatre on St. Peter's street in New Orleans, without getting anywhere. He simply could not let this opportunity slip by, Indians or no Indians. But . . . the mere thought of them turned his blood cold!

There were not enough Indians in Louisiana to be of much concern, and the lower Mississippi valley was safe, even as far as south Alabama and the wastelands of Florida. But there were only fourteen Counties in Mississippi governed by the white man.

To the north lay the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indian nations. Every traveler was at the mercy of these primitives.

It was through this wild and haunted region that the Natchez Trace passed. Authorization for opening the Trace was contained in separate treaties signed by General James Wilkinson, in command of U.S. troops at Natchez and Fort Adams, in mutual agreement with the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes. The treaty spelled out the terms under which an open and convenient wagon road was to be constructed between the settlements of the Mero district in the state of Tennessee and those of Natchez in the Mississippi territory. It was the old trail blazed by General Andrew Jackson in his march to New Orleans during the war of 1812, which had given him the title of "Old Hickory."

It was over this rough trail, cut through virgin timberland, around rugged hillsides, along the Big Black river and the Yalobusha, that Vik was

to make his way to acting fame . . . or . . . at least that was his ambition.

Now, standing on the wide, planked veranda of Fort Le Fleur, gazing down the steep, sandy bluff to Pearl River, overlooking the site that was later to become Jackson, the capitol city of Mississippi, Vik was watching the haggard, half-animal forms of "friendly" Indians infiltrating the crowds or drowsing sleepily in the shade of the low eaves, in motley groups around the saddle and pack horses which stood patiently at tether.

The only thing that held Vik's nervousness in check was the tall, dark man beside him, this handsome stranger, this stalwart sun-tanned giant who looked as if he finished what he started. It was Rafe standing so close, so warmly near, so obviously protective that kept Vik from changing his mind, and taking the next south-bound stage to New Orleans.

Glancing up, wrapped in his fears, Vik noticed the dark profile silhouetted against the sun. Vik was so frightened so ill at ease, so worried about his plans, and ambitions, that Rafe seemed to him a glorious god, an immortal straight out of the classics. Vik said without thinking:

"Rafe . . . Rafe . . . do you think we'll make it . . . safely? I've got to get through!"

Rafe turned and gazed down at him pensively. For a tense moment their eyes locked and held. There was a faint trace of a smile on Rafe's lips.

"You'll make it Vik, ah swear."

"I don't know anything about guns," Vik went on, desperately, "and I can tell you know what you're doing. I'll hire you to keep them off me

... pay you what you ask ... till I make it through to Tennessee..."

Rafe laughed a sly laugh.

"Vik, my boy, keep your gold. Ah'm going that way anyway. And you're safe ... as long as there's breath in my body ... you're safe!"

Vik glanced away, thoughtful, then glanced back. Their eyes locked again, as if they were under a spell.

"You really mean that, don't you, Rafe Savage?"

"Ah'll keep my word."

Vik let out a contented sigh. He eyed the Lefaucheaux Brevete revolver strapped to that muscular thigh as hard as iron, and a sense of relief swept over Vik like a protective hand.

Rafe understood his fear of the unfamiliar and his face became a mask of concern.

"You wait here, boy," he said, gripping Vik's arm, "Ah'll go fetch us a mug of Java. Make you feel better."

Vik nodded, and obediently waited. He allowed his gaze to wander over to the other side of the river where the old sternwheeler, now loaded until its deck rode but a few inches above the water was moving sedately out to mid-stream. On the hillsides flamed bright carpets of rhododendrons going up the walls of dark pines. Pale closed Gentians were bending with the breeze and Vik listened quietly to a white-breasted nuthatch in a far off cedar; the joyful laughter of the children scuffling in the dust. He whispered low, beneath his breath:

"Let those love now, who never loved be-

fore:

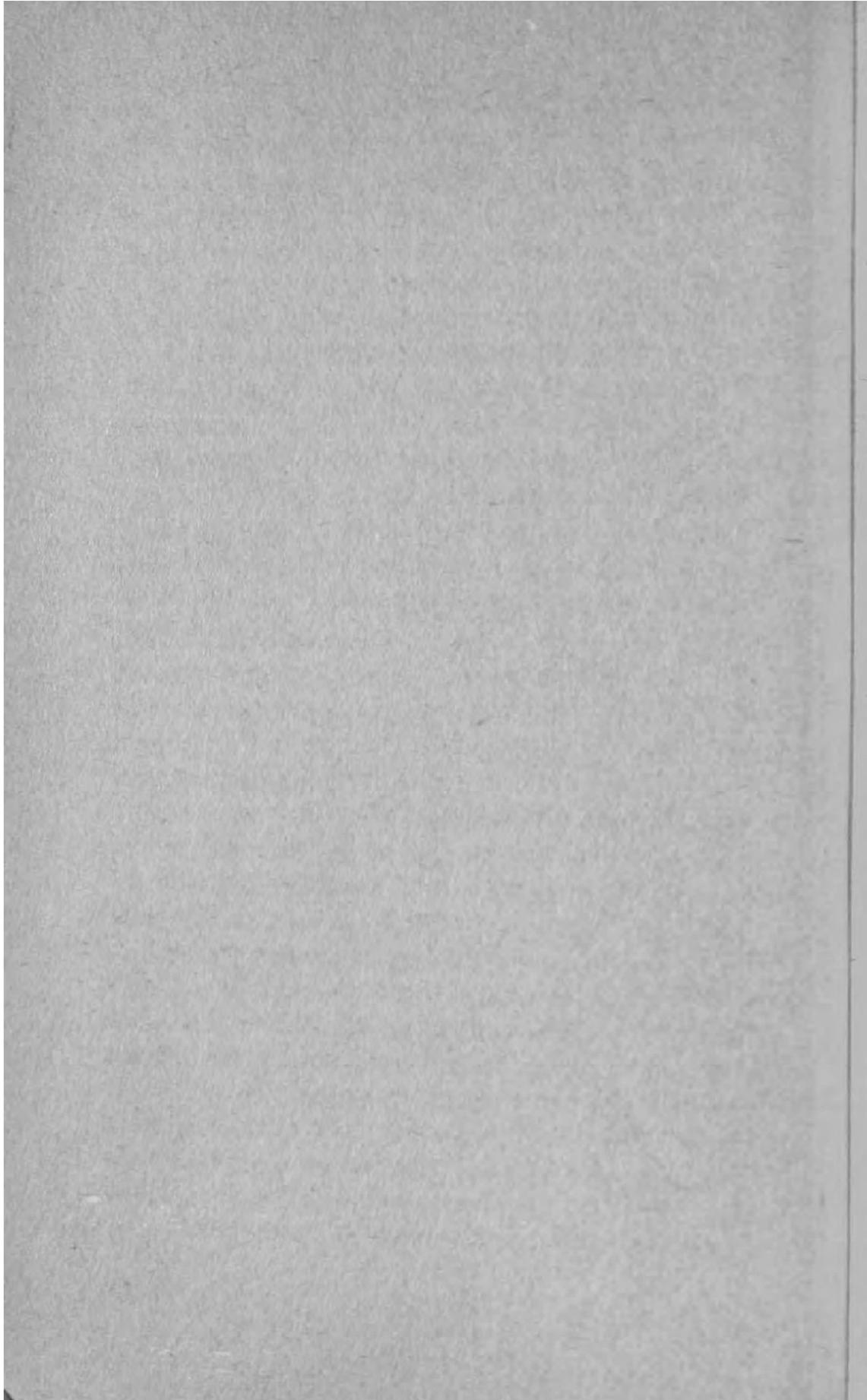
And those who always loved, now love more . . . ”

Rafe came up to his side unexpectedly, with two mugs of steaming coffee sloshing over. Like most masculine men he was not domestically inclined and he made quick apologies—as he would gallantly—make to a beautiful woman.

“It’s like the nectar of the gods,” Vik said, taking one of the mugs and sipping sparingly.

“It’ll warm our guts till we get to Yazoo,” Rafe said, his voice low, emotional, almost a tremor. “There’s a stage post there. We can eat, and there’s a room where we can sleep.”

Their eyes met magnetically in the golden afternoon light, the look filled with unspoken meaning as a mocking bird called from the hollow.



Chapter Two

The stage came in, jouncing on its swings. The driver was hell bent for leather, giving a great show of reins, whoops, yells, and curses. The six horses, harnessed with glittering silver trappings, were the best stock from Texas paddocks. They pranced and kicked up the red dust.

Pandemonium broke loose as the stage arrived. There was wild excitement—orders were being given, men were bragging about their luck on the upland turn children were squealing, dogs were barking and the hired help was running to and fro exchanging the lathered horses for fresh ones, Vik pushed through the mob in an attempt to climb aboard the stage.

He tugged at his deer-hide trunk, but Rafe was at his side in an instant. He swung the trunk up on one broad shoulder and, with the agility of an ape, climbed up the side of the coach and

strapped it to the luggage compartment. With arms and legs spread, he leaped from the stage, and hit the dust like a circus performer. In that one instant Vik caught a glimpse of his powerful physique, hard thighs bursting through his tight buckskins, buttocks as firm as pound cheese, arms like a blacksmith's. Rafe was a beautiful, but terrifying picture of brute strength, dark power and dexterity.

Rafe caught hold of Vik's hand satchel to toss it aboard, but Vik held him in check. Inside were his books, plays, classic literature, his last link to the theatre, his past . . . his most precious possessions.

"I'll keep this on my person," he said politely, but firmly, holding the black leather satchel closer to his body.

"Suit yourself," Rafe replied, with a casual, unconcerned air, but Vik felt that he owed the man an apology.

"It's not that I don't trust you, Rafe. But, if I lose this bag I lose my future." He added wistfully, "and my past. It's my life!"

"Full of gold?" Rafe questioned, setting his hat on the back of his head and scratching his forehead until his long black hair tumbled into his curiously lit eyes.

"Trash to you, Rafe Savage, but pure gold to me," was Vik's reply. The satchel was full of plays, of letters on white paper, poetry that could whisk you to Bagdad, Arabia, Egypt at the turn of a page . . . gold indeed to an actor.

When the stage coach was readied, Vik climbed aboard, Rafe lifting him up . . . as he

would a woman . . . Vik took the rear right seat, which would give him the most advantageous observation post as a lookout for Indians ahead, and Rafe occupied the seat directly in front of him, stretching his long, powerful legs out lazily, and shifting his hat so far forward the brim all but hid his eyes.

Vik introduced himself to the only other passenger, a Mr. Jon Blacker—a bloated frog in tightly fitting ill-kept clothes. His top-coat was threadbare at the elbows and seams, his black silk cravat was stained with talcum powder and cologne. His dark, probing eyes were set too near the bridge of his nose, like tiny rosary beads against the dough-softness of his hog-jawed face.

They were off with a jolt. The leather swings beneath the coach were squeaking nervously, the driver was shouting cuss words at his gallant steeds, and slapping the reins against their rumps as their hooves made the dust fly.

The fat Mr. Blacker attempted conversation. He was from Columbia, Vik learned without interest. He was trying to be polite, but Rafe ignored Blacker completely, and deliberately. Blacker said he was only going as far as Fort Adams which bordered the Choctaw nation, the last outpost between the white man's civilization and the Indian's savagery.

"A stinking hell-hole on earth," Mr. Blacker ranted, wiping sweat. "And me to be in charge . . . me!" He thrust a fat finger into his pudgy belly. "I'm not an officer. I'm a civilian. I'm about the most civilian civilian you'd ever chance to meet up with. Fort Adams should be

commanded by the U. S. Militia . . . not by a civilian!"

"Why you going, then?" Rafe asked, eyeing him from beneath the brim of his hat. "Why didn't you stay in Columbia?"

Mr. Blacker fussed with his sweaty cravat.

"Why—er—sir, the town marshall said I got uppity with a young lady, made improper advances . . . mind you . . . improper advances, when she knew all the baser facts of life when she was no more than fifteen. Anyway . . . the marshall thought Fort Adams would tame my desires, mainly because he is sweet on the hussy hisself. He let me take my choice, to command Fort Adams . . . since there were no volunteers . . . or imprisonment at St. Elmo."

"Have you ever been to Fort Adams?" Rafe kept up his rain of questions, either curious, or just having fun with the fat child-seducer seated beside him. Vik, hiding his grin, was enjoying the latter's discomfort.

"Never in my life!" Mr. Blacker answered, his eyes now like the eyes of a frightened rat, "Is it civilized, sir?"

Rafe grunted, leaned back in his seat, lowered the brim of his hat completely down over his eyes. Lifting his long, powerful legs, he rested them on the seat beside Vik.

"About as civilized as a Choctaw happy hunting ground," Rafe replied. A log shack, a lean-to stable, a barrel to catch rain water, two bunk rooms, a stove, somehardtack and a side of bacon. That's all there is to Fort Adams.

Blacker's lower jaw dropped an inch, and his

jowls shook like jelly.

"Then why in the hell do they maintain it?"

Rafe laughed under his hat. "Fort Adams connects to a telegraph line. If there's an Indian raid you have the honor of being the first to relay a message to Les Fleurs Bluff. It'll give them time to reinforce for a line of defense before the Choctaws break through."

"And what about me? My God, man! In the middle of all them savages!"

Rafe, lifting his hat brim, gave him a knowing smile.

"Oh, you'll be scalped, but think what a brave deed you will have done for your country!"

Mr. Blacker cringed, his fat body crumpling like a tent.

"Merciful God! How unfair fate is to man! What a terrible price to pay for a little recreation with a woman!"

"If you want it bad enough it's worth the risk," Rafe put in, chuckling. He turned serious eyes to Vik . . . eyes Vik considered wanton.

"When a man wants his pleasures," he went on, "he's apt to go to some mighty extremes. The stranger it is the better. The younger, the more hankering is a man's honing to get at it."

He eyed Vik again, their heads bobbling from the rickety stage.

Vik choked.

Rafe awakened in his emotions, his thoughts things he could not understand, of which he had no inkling. They aroused his curiosity, provoked an interest he was not altogether sure he liked. The man moved him like an invisible power

moving a stone, like a storm shattering trees and villages, like a gale tearing a house down.

Silently, seriously he considered these things within the man who sprawled lazily in front of him, noticed how the powerful legs seemed about to burst through the worn seams of his syrup candy colored buckskins; how the muscles of his chest made themselves conspicuous, even beneath the soft folds of leather; almost felt his animal warmth, this hidden rapture within him, sensed all his grave, dark beauty. Vik allowed his eyes to wander down the length of Rafe to his straddle where he bulged like ripe melons left in the hollow of two firm terrace rows . . . admiringly thought him a Paladin in Western garb, a knight-errant of Charlemagne or King Arthur.

Plaguering these grand thoughts, though, was his terror of the Indians, his desperation to get through this savage, uncivilized country to New York and, glancing seriously at Rafe—who still eyed him avariciously—he cried:

“Is Fort Adams as far as the telegraph line goes? I mean . . .”

“Ah’m afraid so,” Rafe said, interrupting, as if he could read Vik’s mind, his fears. “From there up it’s every man for himself . . . without the U. S. Militia to back him.” Then he winked at Rafe, a long, slow, meaningful wink . . . which the fearful Vik did not comprehend. He mistook the conspiratorial wink for friendliness and felt relievedly secure in the knowledge. “Don’t fret, Vik boy,” Rafe went on, the sound of his voice, even, erasing more of Vik’s continual terror, “as long as Ah got my trusty Lefaucheux Brevete,” he

slapped at his thigh, "No harm will come to my Swedish flaxen!"

Mr. Blacker chuckled at that, as if he had been included in the noble gesture of protection.

The stage coach rumbled on, seemingly forever. The three in the coach lapsed into silence.

Vik, relishing the absence of Mr. Blacker's whimperings, his unendurable protests, tried to occupy his thoughts as he scanned the landscape outside his window, the gaudy red land fleeing past like waves on an emerald sea. On each side of the coach, but a narrow, wheel-rutted trail not more than ten feet wide, stood a wall of woods. So thick were the rasping sounds from the squeaking coach, and the horses hoofs, that they echoed against them and bounced back as from a wall.

Here and there stood a lonely farmhouse, floating in golden field corn, bordered by crude rail fences and stone barracades from prowling Indians with hay shocked in cone-shaped stacks on the leveled fields. Occasionally they passed a barn, and its barnyard with cows and horses once a lone church with its improvised steeple stabbing the blue, empty sky. Deer in pairs, and in herds leaped at times but a few feet ahead of the plunging horses. Quail, leading their young, scattered with wild cries. And crows and hawks circled lazily overhead, remote, immune to human marauders. The coach shook, bounced and swayed, tossing the three occupants like seeds in a gourd. Red dust mushroomed under the wheels, rose in a suffocating cloud, glowing like the aftermath of a shooting star.

Vik, unaccustomed to such primitive transportation—such exposure to the raw crudeness of the elements, coughed continuously. The dust settled on his fine gray top-coat, on his wine silk waistcoat, his watered silk cravat—and all his tiring efforts could not erase it, or bring his attire to its former immaculate elegance. Sweat beaded his brow. It ran down his face, into his cravat, soaked his white silk shift beneath. His long blond hair lay plastered to his brow; and his pale blue eyes felt as if they were going to burn out of his skull. His shapely red lips became parched, so badly did he long for water, and his hands, folded in the straddle of his thighs, felt clammy and sticky. The huge rings on his fingers, the massive black onyx with the embossed head of a pagan prince, and the square emerald crowned with an alabaster dragon, turned loosely on his sweaty fingers.

Taking out a huge gold watch, the only gift he owned from his mother, he glanced at the tiny lace-like hands dispiritedly. They pointed to five o'clock. He looked out the window, evaluated the sky. Long dark shadows were beginning to creep along the slopes, lending to the rugged landscape an eerie, almost a nightmare quality.

"It'll be dark soon," Rafe said, leaning forward and peering out the window. "We'll be at the Fort in three ... four more hours." He glanced at Vik, patted him on the thigh. "New to this ... ain't you?"

Vik nodded. His eyes dragged round to Rafe.

"Ain't like them fancy footlights, and all that elegant stage acting, eh?" Rafe smiled at him

warmly, filled with deep concern.

"It's like a journey through a dark hell," Vik shuddered, glancing once at Rafe then out the window.

"It *is* hell!" Mr. Blacker snorted, pulling in his fat lips. "Gives me the willies! Wish to God I could jump out of this flea-bitten stage, and run for my dear life!"

Rafe eyed him with apprehension.

"Why don't you then? Nobody got a hand on you, holding you back. Be my guest. Go ahead and jump!"

Vik tried to smother a laugh.

Mr. Blacker growled. In disdain, with the air of a highbrow, he glanced heavenward.

"With that shotgun guard riding seat above?" he cried in his own defense. "Been posted up there beside the driver every since we left Columbia. He's got an itchy finger, just for me. He'd give both his seeds to take a shot at me . . . probably empty both barrels if I so much as lifted the latch on this door."

Rafe continued the charade.

"You must have done more than just gape at that purty little girl down in Columbia. Sure you didn't damage her—her—virginity?"

Vik was stung with quick embarrassment, but he cocked an ear. The curiosity of youth led him on.

"Well . . . making a long story short," Mr. Blacker said, and with exaggerated boastfulness, smacking his lips as if he had just devoured a rump-steak. "It wasn't so much that I bothered her virginity as you so basely put it—but the

manner in which I did it."

"Ah don't follow you," Rafe asked, a little more curious.

"She didn't bother her head to squeal as long as I was doing it—ah—naturally," Mr. Blacker explained, without a fathom of reticence, "but the minute I put my mouth on it . . . well, she screamed like a stuck pig!"

Rafe's eyes popped. He instantly glanced at Vik, who in turn was glaring straight at Mr. Blacker, not wanting to believe what he had just heard. He was not completely ignorant on the subject. Being in the theatre, mingling sometimes socially with the other members, the frequently changing cast, frequenting the cabarets and eating places in the Vieux Carre of New Orleans, along St. Louis and Daughine streets, he had listened, and with aversion, to the fops delineating their sexual appetites . . . their lustful encounters with strange girls, with callow young girls from the streets—of which they had taken shameful advantage. They spoke, too, of young boys, boys on the brink of starvation, who had complied only as a means to keep alive. He had heard, also, of wild parties, strange revelries that seemed to go on anywhere there was a dark alcove, anywhere two bodies could be concealed . . . everywhere one strange being could lock with another.

It had been their world, not his, and he had regarded such dark, demoniacal acts as the height of baseness. Now, here sat another one of their kind in the coach with him, a fat monstrous blot of weird appetites, swollen and bloated with

sin, and grinning and preening and smacking his saltless lips with the unbecoming swagger of a satyr.

Again Vik glanced at Rafe, caught something of question—and a glitter in the dark eyes that looked back at him. They were filled with speculation and awe, and this frightened Vik a little. He had always been wary of those he could not readily understand, a little cautious, and for the first time since he had met Rafe Savage, he felt something of tension—of uneasiness in his presence. This vague something had been triggered by the fat Mr. Blacker's narrative about the young girl . . . and, strangely had suddenly experienced this unease about Rafe and himself.

"The bible speaks against such unnatural crimes," Vik said to the dreamy-eyed Mr. Blacker, wanting desperately to bring hell-fire and damnation on top of his evil head for taking advantage of a young ignorant girl. "Once, in the land of Sodom . . ."

"Spare me your tiresome, boring Phillipics from the bible," Mr. Blacker cried, lifting a pudgy hand as if to halt his voice. "The physical craving for a woman or man . . . whichever you desire . . . is as natural as your craving for food, rest, equality, or peace. Man is guided by his animal instincts, and he carries out by these lusts the dictates of the almighty. If God had not intended man to know these lusts he would have created him without them. We do only what our physical selves demand and, if these things are condemned by society, then it is because society has imposed such laws . . . and not

God."

Rafe gave a satisfied grin, his dark eyes sparkling in the reddening, sunset light.

"Is that why you're being chased out of Columbia?"

"Don't be impertinent with me, young man," Mr. Blacker retorted, lifting his nose to a haughty cant. "Because the so-called society of that miserable one-horse town considered me vile is not proof of my villainy. *They* are not my peers!"

"You must answer to the environment which surrounds you," Vik put in, remembering his own father's timely advice when he had insisted on joining the (to his sire) repugnant clan of the theatre.

"And *you* should know that better than I," snapped Mr. Blacker, his eyes popping out like a stuck frog. "Aren't you of the stage? No place else on earth is there such a pig sty of debauchery! The stage is but a flesh pot for the weird. Surely you are enmeshed in that sordid world ... fops, dandies, harlots, ghosts of the streets ... Psyche, Narcissus, Hippolytus, Ganymede ... they are all there in your lantern show of hell! And you tell me that I am ruled by my environment. Bah!"

Vik relapsed into a momentary asylum of quiet, for he knew the ugly old man confronting him was right. Vik had been exposed to the evil of twisted minds by his ambitions for the theatre, but he had managed to date to ride clear of them, blameless, unaffected. He had listened, but with a remote ear. He had learned, but he

had not participated. The life of the other actors did not interest or concern him. He lived only for acting. His young body, his desires were entirely his own.

In his lapse into silence, he cut a sharp eye in the direction of Rafe; found the dark man looking squarely back at him in return and something of that dispicable world stirred within him. Like an echo out of some haunting theme, some undercurrent, mixing the mental with the physical, pulled him into Rafe's gaze, and in that gaze they merged somehow mentally, like two leaves rushing together in a whirlpool.

"Don't let this old fat goat rowel you," Rafe said to him surprisingly, his dark eyebrows arched, his liquid eyes peering at him from beneath long curling lashes. "You're as innocent as a babe, Vik Alta."

"Bah!" snorted Mr. Blacker, who let out a triumphant chuckle, "who you two think you're fooling! Can't I see you rolling your eyes at each other? Don't you think I know what this stage-struck Cybele is thinking? I haven't been buried at Columbia all my life . . . New York, Chicago . . . even to San Francisco! I can spot one a mile!"

At that Vik jumped.

Rafe noticed that jump, beheld with deep interest the nervous tension which, suddenly, had descended upon Vik, and quickly came to his defense.

"Don't judge others by your evil Mr. Blacker. A man has to look and dress his profession. Vik here is an actor, so he must look the part. He is

only living up to his trade."

"So did Hephaestus," Mr. Blacker cooed. "But that didn't make him a god."

"You use mighty fancy words, Mr. Blacker," Rafe said mockingly, "especially to be going to Fort Adams under guard. Nobody to hear you out there but wolves and cottonmouths and wild Indians."

That stopped Blacker cold. But then, out of his own absurdity, he asked triumphantly:

"If you consider your cohort such a man of accomplishment, have him recite some of his professional patois."

"Speak something," Rafe urged Vik, laying a firm hand on his leg. "Show this old tent-breeches."

Vik, though tired and weary from the joggling in the dust littered stage, fumbled in his leather case for an appropriate book.

"Well recite, boy!" Mr. Blacker yelled, his jaws flopping. "Novice or professional, at worst it beats the monotony of this horrid journey."

Vik, selecting a book and thumbing through it to a dogeared page, leaned toward the sunset light coming through the tiny window and began to read, at first low, plaintive then vibrantly to the echo of his native Swedish tongue:

"So sweet her frame, so exquisitely fine,
she seems a statue by a hand divine,
Had not the wind her waving tresses
show'd,
and down her cheeks the melting sorrows
flow'd.

Her faultless form the hero's bosom fires:

the more he looks, the more he still admires."

"Bravo!" Rafe shouted, giving applause, as Vik paused, swallowed to clear his throat of dust, then went on.

On and on he read. Darkness came as the sun fell below the dark pines in the west. Only his voice and that of the straining six up front galloping over the hard worn earth and the slapping of reins could be heard in the primitive twilight.

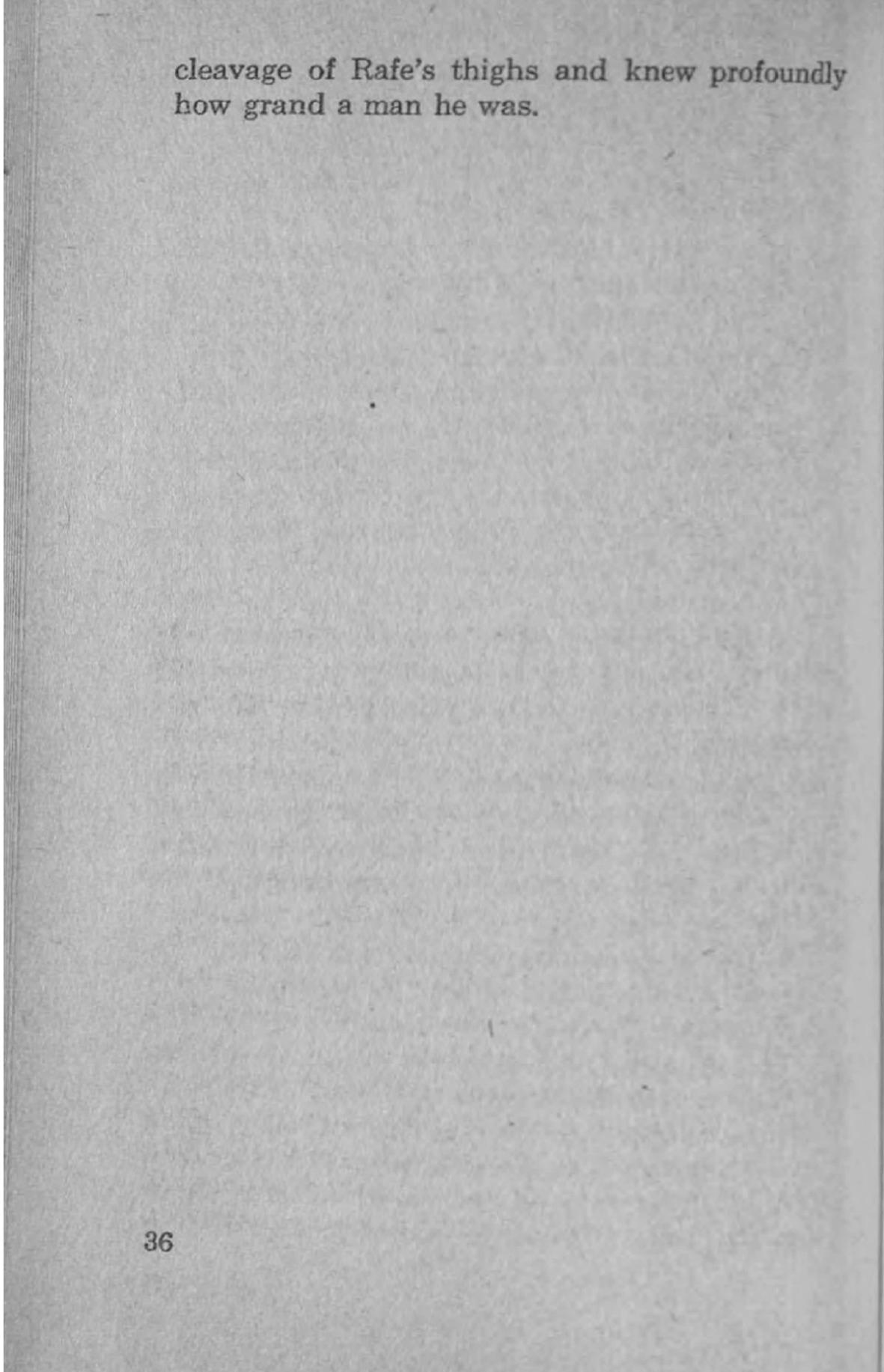
Then, Vik's voice faltered, and died as it became too dark for him to see the page. Wearily, all but asleep, he let the book slip from his fingers. It fell on the floor at Rafe's feet, who picked it up and restored it to Vik's lap.

"You are wonderful," Rafe said, taking Vik's hand firmly in his. He glanced once at Mr. Blacker, whose enormous body lay sprawled against the opposite side of the seat. He was now fast asleep.

"Lay your head in my lap," Rafe said then to Vik, almost in a loving whisper. Hardly realizing what he was doing, Vik fell back into Rafe's lap, his blond head buried in the warm hollow of his thighs.

Drunk on weariness, hunger and thirst, Vik sensed how wonderful it was to be in the deep dark hollow of Rafe's loins ... to rest on the power of him, the welcome security of his strength, his awed appreciation.

The stagecoach rolled on, like a chariot going up into heaven. The stars came out, to gleam like fire-flies frozen around the moon. Vik shifted his position, sighed, felt the rising growth in the



cleavage of Rafe's thighs and knew profoundly how grand a man he was.

Chapter Three

As Rafe had so accurately calculated, they arrived at Fort Adams around nine. The coach hubs screamed as its wheels slewed around the sharp ruts, and the whole, clumsy superstructure bounced in the air like a child's toy on a string as the driver reined the sweating team into the wide, level stretch, through the trenches lying idle with their threatening cannon unattended, and brought them to a halt directly in front of the Fort.

A lone Indian—a friendly—met them with a grin, the only occupant at the Fort. He looked rather comical to Vik, taking note of his black bowler hat adorned with a feather, his awkward ape of the white man's garb. Over his baggy trousers he wore a loincloth, not as a garment, but as a symbol of his masculinity. Unknown to Vik, custom dictated that, if he neglected to

wear the piece, he would be labeled by other Indians as a squaw.

Rafe jumped out first and, while he busied himself helping to unload the luggage, Vik and the grumbling Mr. Blacker climbed out and stretched their cramped and aching bodies.

Completely alone for a moment, Mr. Blacker asked him directly:

"I couldn't help but take note of you a-laying in that scout's mangy lap. Do you practice homo-sodomy?"

Vik shot him an insolent gaze.

"I am no Greek!" he answered, with deliberate ice in his voice. He thought that, afterward, he must be careful to steer clear of Mr. Blacker and his too-curious eyes.

Vik came around to the rear of the stage to where Rafe was unleashing the canvas flap over the luggage.

"I don't take to that Mr. Blacker," he said, as if seeking the scout's protection.

"That makes two of us," Rafe answered. Then, as if to change the subject. "Well, Vik my boy, this is it! Fifty yards ahead and you're in Choctaw country."

"It gives me the creeps," Vik stammered, trembling more from the fear of the Indians than the fall chill which prowled the land in the sun's absence. With some reserve, he studied the dark bulk of the fort, the pale moonlight casting its wan hues over the land beyond, the woods cut black shadows, frighteningly, intensely black.

"It ain't that bad," Rafe complied, sounding casual. "If you can make it safely to Juka then

its free-wheeling from there on. The Memphis and Charleston railroad passes through there, and Juka and Holly Springs and Corinth is the end of the Indian nation. Besides, there'll be the driver with his ever-watchful eye and his double barrel shotgun."

A lump suddenly rose in Vik's throat, and his heart beat with such rapidity he thought it would leap through his panting chest.

"But, Rafe," he asked, his voice echoing with tremors. "Aren't you going? I mean . . . is this where we part company?"

"Afraid it is, Vik. This is Madison county. Just over the way is Yalobusha River and Yazoo. Ah'll rent a horse and cut through."

"But I thought you said awhile back you'd be with me all the way . . . that no harm'll come?"

"Ah did, Vik boy. But that was to give you courage . . . until you could get acquainted with the country, to brace you for the rough and ready times ahead."

Vik went faint. He and the driver going alone through Indian country, pitted against those heathen savages! Suddenly, he had the notion to strike out at this cool, calculating Rafe; to put him in his place for making him feel so safe, so secure, then to pull the props out from under him the way he had. With this let-down feeling, snatching up his satchel, he headed for the fort.

"Now hold it a minute," Rafe said, his voice stern, but warm. "Don't you go off half-cocked. You're a man, ain't you?"

At that Vik halted.

"Sure, I'm a man grown. But you—you're

deserting me!" Rafe laughed uproariously.

"Ah'm not deserting you, boy. You got your ways. Ah got mine. We got separate lives. You go your way. Ah go mine."

Vik looked at him in the faint moonlight with rage and terror in his heart. Oddly, he thought of the trip up, laying in his lap, the balm of warmth, the security that had come over him. At that wonderful thought, suddenly, he felt chilled and desolate standing there in the darkness; the outline of the fort looming up like a phantom of doom; the stagecoach with its horses blowing vapor from their nostrils; and he wished hopelessly that he had never started on this fool's venture.

"The Indians," he muttered, half-consciously. "Those awful savages."

"Come," Rafe suggested, placing a warm hand on his shoulder. "We'll have some hot vittles, then sleep until about daybreak. You'll feel better. Things always look better in the light of day."

Silently Vik obeyed, and they had hot coffee, side meat and biscuit which the Indian had turned out on the fuming wood stove, and directly afterwards Rafe showed him to a small dingy room in the rear of the fort.

"The stage driver asked me to give you this room," Rafe said. "'Cause it is the best one in the fort. But," he added sheepishly. "Ah'm gonna have to sleep in with you . . . you don't mind, ah hope?"

"I don't mind," Vik replied, surveying the sad colored room with woebegone eyes. In fact he

was glad. Though sodden with fatigue, he felt he would not sleep a wink if he had to endure the night alone in this drab, filthy cubby-hole, its one tiny window opening out on that savage Indian world with all its terror and uncertainty.

Under the flickering light of a burning wick in a saucer of hogfat Vik timidly undressed. Something about the fact of Rafe, this handsome giant before him, sleeping in the lumpy bunk beside him, frightened Vik a little, caused him to alert his every sense, his every emotion. He had never slept in the same room with strangers, especially with anyone so instinctively primitive as Rafe, and every nerve in his young body trembled with a sudden instinct toward self-protection. He did not comprehend what he feared, but he feared, and the physical magnitude of this savage man stripping before him set every fiber of his being vibrating against the walls of his tiny frame.

Pulling off everything except his long winter wools, fidgeting with his clothes, making sure they were folded neatly over the back of the straight-backed chair, he lay down shyly on the quilted mattress which smelled of dankness, and mold.

Silently, curiously, out of the corner of one eye, he watched Rafe take off his clothes, thankful for the dim glow of the light which hid him from the other's view.

To Vik's surprise, Rafe stripped completely naked as unconsciously as if they had shared this room together all their lives. And when he stepped close to the candle to blow out the light

Vik's heart leaped to his throat. He had never seen a man so powerfully built, so in tune with the primitive surroundings. And, curiously, eagerly, he let his eyes roam at will, almost hungrily.

Rafe looked so dark there in the golden hues of the candle, his broad shoulders looming in the dark shadows, his long black hair a savage shadow halo in a wanton masquerade, bathed in the dim, yellow glow. He was something out of Greek mythology, something Vik had read or dreamed—more vision than real—so dark, so utterly beautiful he seemed sublime. And Vik's eyes, curiously, bemused with wonder and awe, thrilling him strangely, surveyed the length and breath of Rafe, roaming, roving, caressing and conjecturing.

Without caution he let his eyes fix upon Rafe's groin, where the black hair spread below the navel, forming a shadowy nest in his straddle. There his enormous organ, slightly turgid, loomed so sensuously it but made Vik faint. It was though it held, in its uplifted beauty, a body, a breath, a heart of its own, a thing sentiently alive, apart from the magnificent body to which it was so sublimely attached; yet a great part, a noble extension which completed the man, and which the body of the man completed . . . both joined in such a unison of flesh and hair and savagery he resembled a hamadryad stallion, his organ twitching, vacillating, surging at the smell of mares.

Within this fusion of glowing gold, of deep, immense shadow, of darkness and light, Rafe

seemed the man-god, the god-man, coming forth out of primeval time a wraith of memory, a vision of all man's dreams of man, the ultimate that is man, the uprooted images of genetic memory.

Something wild and untamed that is hidden, somewhere, in every man was here plainly visible, the personification of lust, the physical gauge of lust, and it seemed to Vik, watching, trembling from the darkness, that something of this god's physical power—perhaps his strong masculine small—invaded his senses; reached out across the room to him and drugged his mind. And when at last Rafe bent and blew out the light, and a moment later had slid in beside him, his trembling was almost too much for him to stand.

"You should take off them itchy woolens," Rafe said, his voice plaintive with timely emotion. "You'll rest better, feeling free."

His god had commanded and Vik lifted his body, obediently to slip down his long handled underwear. As he lifted up his small but shapely legs to pull the garment off his feet and ankles, he felt Rafe's strong huge hands slip up his inner thighs, felt himself without power to resist—swept into Rafe's powerful arms. As unresisting as if this strange mixture of celestial passion and love, had been an accepted part of his young life, Vik lay and allowed himself to be loved by this dark, savage stranger. Swallowed up in the hard, hair-covered body, enmeshed in the entanglement of his iron sinewed limbs, his overlapping thighs, he basked as any woman surrendering to

her man, gloried in this man's body close to his, trembled both with passion and awe as Rafe turned his face to his, cupping his bronze hand beneath his trembling chin, and kissed him fondly on the lips, at first with warmth, mellowness, like the kiss of understood love, then with building passion, robbing him of breath, of sense, of anything but the moment . . . this wild, unbelievable moment.

That he blended so naturally with this savage man of the woods he did not question. He was swept up too enthrallingly, too overwhelmingly to question motive, to pursue an abstraction. Born of a physical world, of a physical nature, out of the very loins of the blond Vikings, he unleashed whatever restraint he possessed, tossed his reins of control aside, and gave himself to this dark giant who willed, instinctively, that he gave himself.

With the agility of sleight of hand, Rafe turned him over on his stomach, mounted him as Paris may have taken Helen, spread his legs wide apart, carefully, lovingly, and an instant later Vik's innocence—his vestal temple was taken . . . not ruthlessly, not as if in the act of rape, though Rafe's body, his drive contained the essence of savagery, but with careful, deliberation. Slowly at first, Rafe's huge member found the soft orifice of flesh, parted it, and entered; then thrust in and out like a battering ram at a fortress wall.

Succumbing, limp with passion, to the love of the giant who lay atop him, Vik relaxed his body, melted under the muscular, hard body driving above him—pressing his soft flesh into

the lumpy, smelly mattress. Only his own buttocks, pivoting, gyrating in the instinctive rythm of the female, added ecstasy to ecstasy. In no other way did Vik move at all, but with this movement he acted as an initiate—drawing from his own hidden desires the instinctive dance appropriate to the singing tune of flesh and love in his blind effort to please this wayward giant.

Finally, as the hard fibers of Rafe's organ burned the tissues of Vik's rectum, tissues as thin and lovely as tinted gauze, Vik sensed a great surging, a flowing of molten sap, and he knew Rafe had spermed, baptising his body, his emotions, his young mind with the symbol of his love, giving, taking, then giving again, blinding Vik forever to the altar of carnal lust which was as old as mythology.

Instinctively now, he knew he was made for this, acknowledged it, as Rafe smothered him with kisses, drowned him in the sensuous warmth of his swarthy arms and thighs, and he felt no shame at this realization.

Should he? He was not certain. The call was so instinctive, so demanding, so overwhelming, so positive—as final as a wind that blows a house away—that he was left helpless to question it. Bliss was stronger than logic. Rafe was more beautiful than any sorrow.

The savage giant had awakened in Vik something deeper, more basic than life. He had opened new doors, had allowed him to witness the untold beauty which lay on the opposite side. Like Jacob taken to Heaven by the angels to view its beauty before being returned to earth

... would Rafe bring him back to this drab, frightful world?

Vik knew he could not, would not. He knew it acutely, breathtakingly, as Rafe gathered his small body into the folds of his great person, fondling him madly, contentedly, making of this dark, dingy room the abode of heaven on the outskirts of hell.

As if gutted by all save his own immediate desires, bound to whatever whims pleased him, demanded of him, to drink this dark, sinewy body dry, Vik wiggled down into the hollow of the great, hair-piled chest, sank his lips over the hard nipples, slid to the hairy navel, thrust in his hungry tongue, rolled it lovingly, forgetful of time nor place, taking his fill . . . never relenting . . . even if the room was stormed with savage Choctaws, even tho' a feathered tomahawk should split his skull, flinging him into the blackness of death. He would have this pillage of warm flesh, would gorge his nerves, his senses, on this masculine prize, this masculine epitome. Uncontrolled now, being helped mercifully by Rafe's eager hands pressing down on his shoulders, he slid further into darkness, into rapture.

Rafe turned on his right side, thrust up one huge thigh. Vik, with bestiality, cupped his saliva coated lips over the jacked-up organ, let his lips slip lovingly down over the enormous head, down, down, until his forehead felt the brush of tendrils in the black field of curling hair. Rafe caught him beneath the shoulders with both his hands and hunched forward, again and again, powerfully, until Vik felt as though he was being

stretched over every muscle in Rafe's body, stretched thin as silk over Rafe's primitive strength. Wild now, he kept his rhythm, his mouth moving in unison with Rafe's loins, his narrow hips rising completely from the bunk, jerking back, then coming forward with a thrust eager to fulfill, by the same hunger that compelled each to render himself.

Like one body instead of two, they rose and fell, like molten bubbles in a volcano, in that irresistible rhythm of life, obeying a call stronger than life, stronger still than death, for it was more vital to them than life or death, more demanding of their powers as beings. Obeying dark dreams sung to the tune of man's concubinage by man, Vik danced to the tune of male love, the rhythm of homosexuality set by the fighting men of antiquity.

They could not stop now. They had gone too far. No! still farther they were bound on their mindless journey! They were sacrificed to it. They were becoming the slaves of this lust—slaves who loved their bondage. Pain was now a kiss. Rapture a never-fulfilled torture. They had sold themselves into slavery, manacled themselves together, bound themselves to serve its lustful holiness with all their good and ill content. And they must be content. They must find, with each thrust of groin into parted lips, contentment. And they both went at it as if in this lay their only ambition. They must succeed. They would succeed. Rafe giving, Vik taking. One would be the cure for what ailed the other, and vice-versa.

This last battle of sex was stripping them of care for their own lives or of others . . . with the exception of each other's. Gusts of cruelty now, perversion, lusts ran lightly over the surface without troubling them. They were learning that the pangs of love were too sharp, griefs too deep, ecstasies too high for their finite selves to register. When emotion reached this peak the mind would choke and their memory would go blank until the frenzied seizure at hand was over; and it would not be over until the most precious vintage of Rafe's body was siphoned through his organ into the desperately longing body of Vik. And that would happen. Instinct registered to them, with their every uncontrolled desire, that it would happen.

The attitude of the mind in ordinary human slaves is a devastation. They have lost their worlds. But, as a slave, Vik had found his. He had found it in the giant, dark body of Rafe. Thirsting to punish an appetite he could not prevent, he took savage pride in subjugating his own body, and offered himself fiercely to Rafe in any way which promised physical pain—or the fulfillment of ecstasy.

They would go on until complete exhaustion. And each would exhaust himself on the nerves, emotions, the wild and consuming fires of the other's body. Only through complete exhaustion could their straining bodies find relief.

And the relief came as the hot nectar in Rafe's body found its level over Vik's rasping tongue, slid down his smothered throat and into his belly, like sperm jetted into a woman's womb.

Lying limp now, wet with sweat, even in this chilly room, they took needed breaths, then idly, lovingly, as Rafe allowed his naked thighs to hang limp, Vik sucked at his nest of hair, kissed his organ, nibbled at his enormous seeds in their thin bag of skin, sucking one at a time into his mouth, washing them with his tongue, then the other, bringing low, contented sighs from Rafe's lips.

Cupping him close, his hands beneath his buttocks, drawing him up, jerkedly at times, playfully at others, Vik washed Rafe's loins clean with his wet tongue, loving the best and most fanciful part of him, gnawing tenderly, sucking, kissing with saliva-filled mouth, smelling and enjoying Rafe's masculine scent, that unmistakable scent of the human male, the scent of his sweat, his unwashed pubic hair, the rich odor of his organ where the scent builds and ferments in the thick veins, the tissues . . . a rapturous fragrance more pronounced, more poignant than the mold of the bed, the stinging scent of the cedar logs, the hot fat wick, the sharp annoyance of old leather, tobacco, gunpowder, feet incased in boots for days.

At long last, a minute or a lifetime later—and who could know?—Rafe pulled Vik's body up to his, drowned him with kisses and, suddenly, in this dark, log constructed room, in this lonely outpost, surrounded by the land of savage Indians, this became their accepted, taken-for-granted world.

It was theirs, for a minute, for a lifetime, for an eternity. Memory would have it so, whether

they repeated this night or no; whether dawn broke the spell, robbed them of the rapture they had so willingly shared in the night.

Then, unmercifully, dawn broke. They stirred, eyed the pale pink light through the tiny window, lay and listened sadly, all stifled with sadness, to the men outside drawing in the six horses to the stage, the soft yells, the exasperated commands to the animals, as if the animals could comprehend human language.

Vik considered himself. He had lost his sweet youth's innocence. He had been robbed, but oh how sweetly, how enthrallingly!

Pain echoed through his body, up his rectum but, somehow, he gloried in it. That pain had brought Rafe ecstasy. Turning, he looked at Rafe whose face lay on his chest. His eyes were open, dark pools of light in the still, gloomy room.

"I guess I'm turning into a fuckin' mermaid," Vik said lowly, wondering what Rafe was going to think, now in the heartbreakin light of new day.

"Its what you were born for," Rafe answered, hardly above a whisper. Leaning his face ever so close, his long black hair in tassled ringlets over his bronzed brow, he planted a fervent kiss on Vik's passion burned lips. "God help you, Vik boy, if the Choctaws ever take you prisoner!"

Vik trembled from the sound of his voice, more than his words, for there was something about the timbre of it that gutted him with terror.

And he asked why.

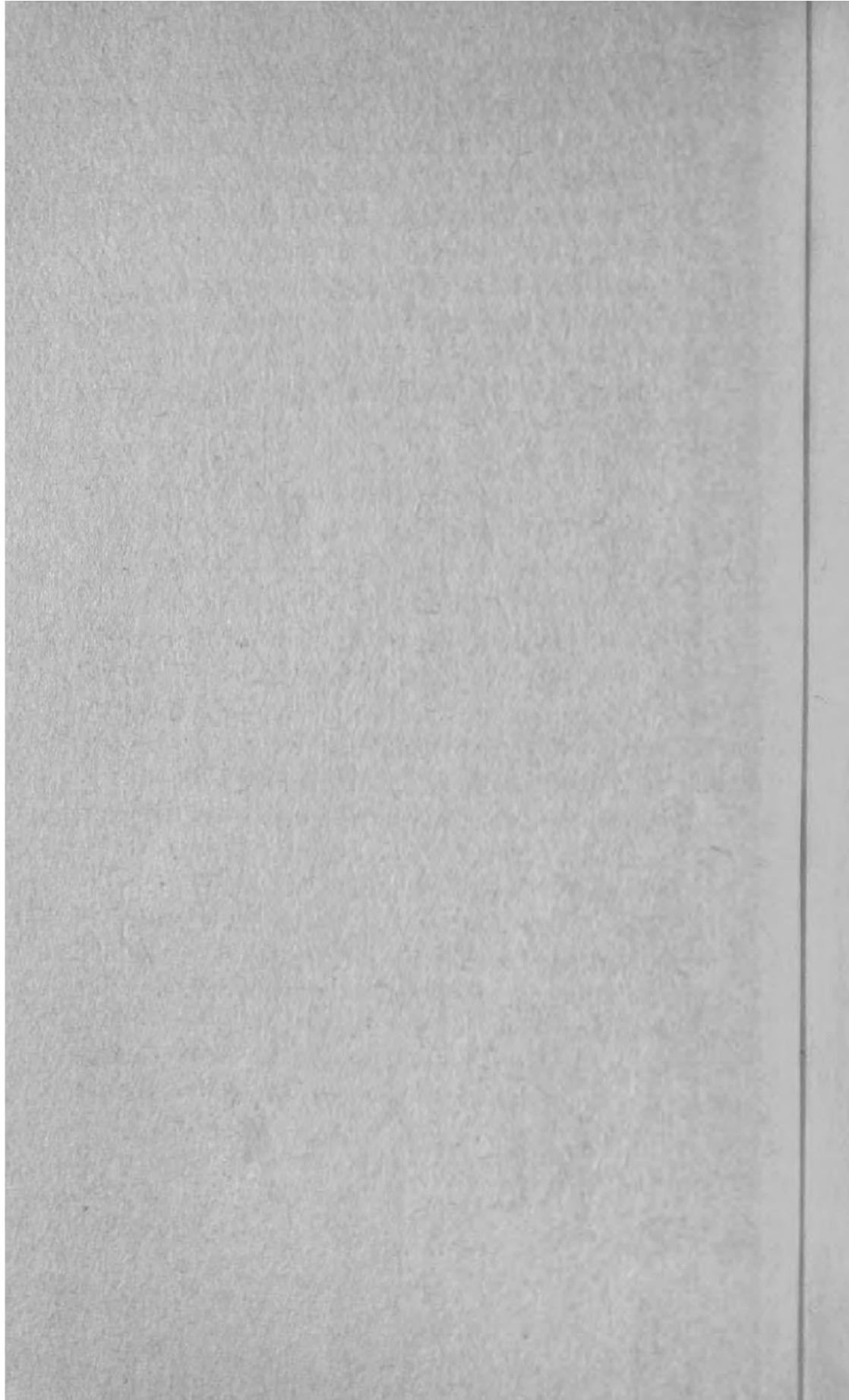
“Because you are golden and fair.”

That casual answer was enough.

Rafe sat up in bed, prepared to get dressed. Turning, he looked at Vik lying there in the pink shadows, looked longingly, with deep concern, and troubled affection.

“Suppose ah better go on with you, to Juka and the railroad anyway . . . lend you some protection.”

Vik smiled thanks with his pale blue, burning eyes.



Chapter Four

So they were off again, with only the driver up above shouting his curse words, and Vik and Rafe riding in the coach. Old fat Mr. Blacker, under constant guard by the man who had followed him up from Columbia, was left whimpering behind to learn the telegraph code from "Shirttail" the friendly Indian.

Prim now in his dusted suit, silk waistcoat, his flaxen hair combed back to a striking point at the nape of his neck, Vik sat facing Rafe in the stage, his blue eyes glowing with a radiance he did not altogether understand. At sly intervals, he eyed Rafe sitting there, his long, arduous legs spread, gloried in the memory of the previous night.

What a man!

And he had partaken of the very best of him!
He had had the most precious thing he could

give. And he carried it now in his young body as nobly as any woman would have carried her child. At the thought of Rafe fathering a child, his ears burned, and pangs of jealousy scorched his face, flushed his cheeks. And he wondered how many women or men he had slept with! Yesterday he would not have given a farthing for what he had done; who he had loved, taken. Now, this bright autumn morning, seated with him in the rocking stage, it made all the difference in the world. Suddenly, with the rapture of last night still fresh on his nerves, so fresh he could still catch faint fragrances of his body-scent, he wanted all of this man, his body, his heart, even his soul.

He wanted him and, though they rocked through enemy territory, through this scarlet wintry land, dangerous at every turn in the trail where cruel Indians might be waiting in ambush, he longed for the dream that they could ride on and on forever . . . to some far off haven, unknown, untouched by the civilized world; some virgin place primeval where Rafe could take him anew, sap his young body with pain. And oh! how he loved that pain if Rafe delivered it!

Along the way, monotonous by a travelers standards, with nothing but woods and hills and shadowed valleys, it looked beautiful to Vik. Beautiful because his heart had made a complete turnabout since yesterday. The sweet gums and rocky mountain maples lay out their burning leaves, trapped in the silver of sunlight, and sycamores lifted their pale branches to the limpid blue sky. Pin oaks, in fiery groups, painted

the landscape with chill flame, sassafras glowed golden, like the Chinese raintree, and bitternuts and wild pecans fleeced the dark green pines like bright threads in a silken tapestry.

To add further to Vik's pleasure Rafe praised him with needed flattery, fondled his legs, and clasped both his hands lovingly—hands a little too small and white for a man's, dwarfed by the enormous gaudy rings he wore—hands that resembled a doll's lying in Rafe's huge paws, covered with Rafe's coarse black hair, tobacco stains and broken nails. To Vik, Rafe's were hands like Vulcan, forging at his mighty smithy in the heavens . . . a veritable god, wreathed in smoke and flame.

At mid-day they halted and had the lunch "Shirttail" had packed for them, and refreshed their thirst from a cold water spring that rippled over smooth obstacles of limestone.

Then onward, in some drowned kind of rhythm from the dull thud of the horses hoofs, the creaking wheels, Rafe's whistling, the joyous sound of a far-off bird, the lazy circling of a crow. Peace. Contentment. For Rafe and Vik—love!

Occasionally they came to a trail leading off through the dense woods; Rafe explaining that some of them had been blazed by white men—perhaps by Desoto or LeMoyne D'Iberville—taken up by French or Spanish land grants, or by the Homochitto Turnpike company or the Indians themselves, migrating in season to fresher, greener pastures. Some of them looked frightening to Vik, as they twisted under the limbs of the trees, going into the dark unknown.

Others looked inviting, joyous trails through the pine needle-carpeted wilderness, an ideal rendezvous with Rafe for a pleasure ride or a picnic.

By mid-afternoon they forded the Yalobusha river, the water up to the axles, coming to a sandbar clearing on the opposite side.

Vik noticed Rafe's sad face. He asked the reason.

"Yazoo is but a mile back," he murmured, his dark head slightly bowed.

"You want to go back," Vik said, with a pain in his heart. How could he ever say goodbye to Rafe?

"Ah want to stay with you," Rafe replied, laying his heart on Vik's heart. "As long as Ah can be with you, Ah want to."

Now and then a farmhouse rooftop showed above the trees. But these became fewer and fewer and, when they came across one that had burned to the ground, Vik became apprehensive.

"Indians?" he asked, twitching his rings nervously.

"Could be," Rafe answered. "Could have been an accident. This is the dry season. A spark from iron dropped on rock can set fire to most anything in such dry forest . . ."

Vik thought he was stretching the point to ease his fears. Though frightened, he felt warmed by Rafe's deep concern for his safety and, through this feeling, harbored the illusion that, somehow he was bound to the man—and the man to him, body and soul.

Then they came to another house, its barns, outhouses and fences burned, laid to blackened

waste; the dark chimney rising naked to the sky. Then they approached another, its caved-in shingle roof still smoking.

Vik saw Rafe finger his revolver nervously, watched with taut nerves, as he took it from its holster, examined it to make sure it was loaded.

The driver stopped the stage, climbed down and came round to where Vik and Rafe peered out at him.

"It don't look good," he said, directing his voice to Rafe. "Think we should turn back to Fort Adams? We could send a wire."

Rafe considered for a moment, his brow furrowed.

"They'd catch up to us. The stage would never outrun them. Might as well go on till dark. Then we can hide in a nest of trees till morning."

The driver gave him a stern look.

"You better ride topside with me . . . keep a sharp lookout."

Vik went white, but he held his tongue, even though he wanted desperately to be near Rafe as long as possible, especially if the Indians decided to attack.

They moved again, this time with a little more speed, the horses' bellies churning, their heavy bodies dark with sweat and laced with foam. The driver cursed more frequently, and Rafe let up on his whistling.

All was caution, and maddening reinwork.

Vik kept his burning eyes on the windows, ready to catch any slight movement in the brush, from the burrow of thick trees.

Then . . . all hell broke loose!

Out of a side trail hidden from view by an outcropping of boulders, came a number of Indians on spotted ponies. They were naked, save for a flying breechcloth, their headgear dancing with flaming feathers, their bodies gaudy with greasy war-paint, necklaces fashioned from shark's teeth and sea shell, tomahawks waving, round deer-hide shields vertical, protecting their lava-colored hides.

They followed the stage for half a mile, then veered in as they caught up. The stage wobbled back and forth, dust poured, and wheels churned maddeningly. Leather reins snapped, the driver bellowed, and the world became a constant roar in Vik's ears.

With unreasoning terror in his heart, he peered out the windows at the pursuing Indians as if in a nightmare. They were wretched creatures, he thought, as they leaned low above their racing, wiry ponies; their faces were hideous with red and yellow paint; their thighs gleaming of oil in the sunlight; their feathers whipping like bright volleys of flame. All fantastic fires, rolling wheels, the stage churning, dust billowing, savage yells Vik sensed, as the import of murder and pillage crashed on Vik's immediately world.

"We will all be slaughtered," he cried in panic, not considering that he was alone inside the stage. "Merciful god! Spare me! Spare me!"

Shots rang out, volley upon volley from the top of the stage, and several Indians, slumping over their ponies, fell to the hard earth, their gaudy blankets trailing loosely in the wind.

Then, as if their very shadows had multiplied

their number, they suddenly appeared in droves. They completely surrounded the stage, climbed over it, lifting their dark bodies from their galloping ponies, pivoting their naked legs up over the guard rails to where Rafe and the driver rode . . . unprotected.

A moment more, as Rafe shouted down to him, Vik clung to the seat supports for dear life, the stage coming to an abrupt halt, all but throwing Vik to the opposite seat. The stage tumbled off the beaten trail, rolled on one side, the horses neighing, screaming, as bodies crushed bodies, legs breaking, bones snapping.

“Rafe! Rafe!” Vik shouted, screamed, as his body tumbled in unison with the stage. It rocked to one side, lay still. Vik stood up, peered out the window, which now formed the roof, the open sky beyond. Lifting himself up, he thrust his tousled head out of the window, only to thrust it into the savage, whooping face of a Choctaw brave, a face hideous with paint and grease—grotesque in its striping, its beady eyes, its rancid odor of skin and dust and sweat. Vik went white, his hands gripping the window rails painfully in a spasm of terror. In one filthy hand the savage held a tomahawk, tipped with a scarlet blade and, with the speed of lightning, he lifted it above his ferocious face, ready to split Vik’s skull.

Then, as if some unseen hand, some celestial miracle had suddenly interceded, he lowered the weapon, his war whoops stilled, his painted expression turning to a grim mask of solemnity.

“Sky eyes!” he shouted, to Vik’s surprise, in

the King's English, and not the sing-song tongue of the Choctaw nor Chicasaw, the Ogala, the Sioux, or the Navaho.

Vik was spared, for what reason he was not certain. Nevertheless, he was spared, if but momentarily.

The Choctaw warrior had seen Vik's eyes, that piercing blue so unfamiliar in this country, his blond flaxen hair, and the awe of it had stilled his murderous wrath, had paralyzed the sweep of his lethal tomahawk.

He called to several of the other warriors thundering past on their painted ponies and, before Vik realized what was taking place, the overturned stage was swarmed about with red men. Roughly, they jerked him up through the window, and shoved him rudely out onto the narrow shoulder of the trail. Quickly, his hands were bound with rawhide and he was tossed astride one of the ponies. A warrior—the one who had discovered him, Vik concluded—climbed up behind him, bringing his long brown arms under Vik's, around his waist, to catch up the tasseled reins. And in that instant Vik caught the rancid odor of unwashed bodies, stale grease, urine, rotten pelts.

On the ground, near the screaming horses, lay the stage driver, a tomahawk buried deep in his skull. Several warriors had Rafe in a firm grip, dragging him up the trail shoulder to where Vik and the others waited.

One look at Rafe and Vik felt sickishly faint.

"Rafe! Rafe!" he cried miserably, terrified beyond all reason, and helpless to do anything

but stare down at him, petrified, stricken to the marrow of his bones.

"Ah'm sorry! Sorry!" Rafe cried back at him, his face smeared with the acid dust, his hair in tangles, his eyes the saddest Vik was ever to see. In their piercing agates lay the agony of his own plight, and compounding that plight, his utter helplessness to come to Vik's rescue. And he murmured, child-like, almost whimpered: "Ah'll save you somehow, Vik boy. Ah'll save you—if Ah have to kill everyone of these stinking bastards."

At that the warrior behind Vik on the pony lifted an arm, mumbled an order in the Choctaw tongue.

Hardly had his voice died then a warrior nearest Rafe, lifted his tomahawk and brought it down alongside Rafe's skull. It grazed his brow, left a dark red line just above his ear. Rafe went limp, as Vik emitted a despairing scream. Rafe, inert, slid from the warriors arms, and into the turfed embankment.

Another signal was given. The stage was looted, the trunks and baggage dragged down, strapped to waiting ponies. Vik saw them lift his own trunk, tie it down, then his satchel of precious books. Some of the baggage was cut open, the contents strung on the ground, greedy hands examining the articles, tossing those that looked unworthy aside.

Thankfully, they did not loot his.

Then, mounting, they moved out, slowly, in double file, doubling back over the Natchez trace until they came to the side trail where they had laid their ambush for the stage. They went

through the tunnel of darkness.

Night came on and, in the wild terror, the warriors became only dark, mysterious shapes to Vik, shadowy beings on the brink of his death, for he had no way of knowing what they intended to do with him. He did not know why he had been spared, but suspected with a numbing horror that they were planning for some kind of special torture for him. Forlornly, he hoped they had not actually killed Rafe. Maybe they had only knocked him unconscious. But wearily he considered this too fallible an excuse to be real. Vik was convinced these savages would spare no one, not Rafe . . . not even him!

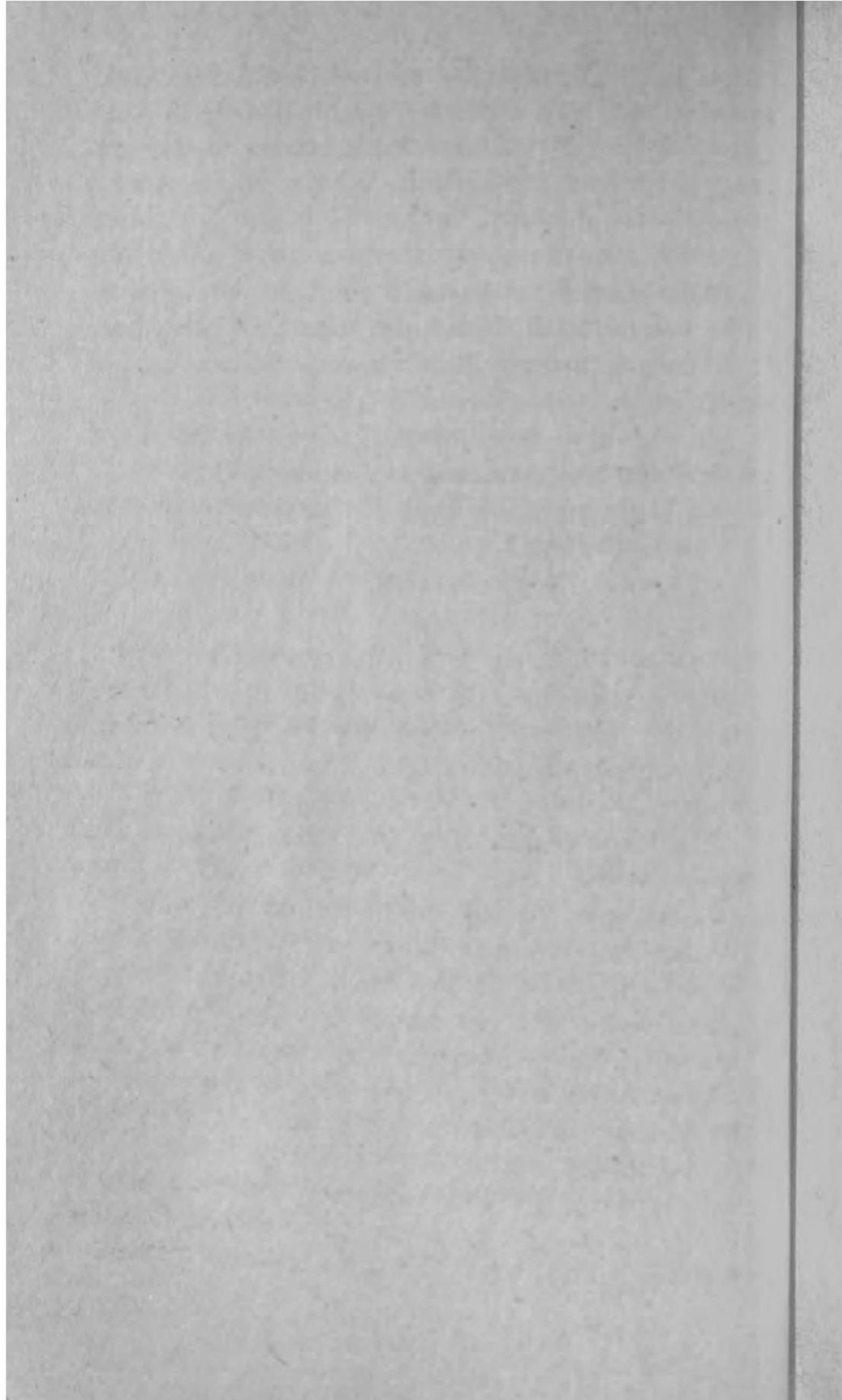
After what seemed hours of plowing through the dense dark of the forest, they came to a clearing overlooking a winding river. Vik could pick out a number of tents rising as black silhouettes in the moonlit sky—enormous mounds, which he thought possibly their burial grounds, several campfires waned to embers, the wraith-like forms of women and children moving in the circle of their glow, and racks and lattice-work constructed from saplings for the drying and curing of meat. Maples shivered their silvery leaves in the night chill, and the chuckle of the water in the stream . . . because of its very tranquility . . . frightened Vik anew. It all looked too peaceful, though shrouded in deep shadows, picked out with bright moonlight—too serene for the stage upon which he was to play out the last role of his life . . . the awesome drama they were to stage for him.

Lifted from the pony, Vik was dragged into

one of the tents where a rock-circled fire glowed warmly, and was thrown roughly on a bed of pelts. Still bound with rawhide strips, he lay on one side where they had dropped him, every bone aching—hungry, fatigued, frightened, and as he fell into the sleep of exhaustion watching the dying flames, he thought of Rafe; wondering if he was dead on that lonely trail, or whether, still alive, he nursed his wounds, and planned a campaign to rescue him.

Vik thought, too, what Rafe said at Fort Adams, and he shuddered at the memory:

“God help you, Vik boy, if the Choctaws ever take you prisoner!”



Chapter Five

At dawn, Vik was taken from the tent by two stout warriors and led before the Choctaw chief. This time, he was not treated roughly, but handled with extreme care, almost as if he were royalty.

The chief, an ancient man, of wiry bones over which his dark, lava colored skin hung like wet silk, sat cross-legged on a mound of pelts, his striking head-gear a fanfare of white feathers tipped with bits of beaten silver and rawhide. Pale blue feathers cascaded down beside his face, brushed his limp nipples, and looked so fantastically bright Vik concluded they had been dyed, for he had never beheld feathers on any bird with such rich plumage.

It appeared the entire encampment was out to pay him homage, or mete out contempt, whatever his fate, and the inhabitants formed a

circle around the old chief who eyed him without expression. For some reason, which Vik could not fathom, they did not show the hostility they displayed so ruthlessly before. Indeed, they were a handsome people, fine of bone and proportion, their smooth hides gleaming in the pink hues of dawn, their long hair shining, straight as a horse tail, a dense indigo blue-black.

Flanked by two warriors, he made his way slowly into the vast circle walled thickly with men, women, and children; their dark, liquid eyes locked on his every move, his every gesture. Vik was terrified; teetered at the edge of panic; he was miserably hungry and fatigued, every muscle aching from his cramped position, tied up through the night before. And above all these nerve-racking agonies, he stood alone against this savage mob . . . alone, frantically alone . . . for them to do with him whatever they willed, and no one in all the world to come to his aid . . . unless, perhaps Rafe. But Rafe was dead, he *knew* he must be dead!

He trembled so he could hardly stand, his breath seemed not to rise and fall at all, and his knees felt like water. Not that he felt in any way a coward. It was just that he was at such disadvantage: at their mercy. That they had kept him alive, rather than kill him, as they had killed the stage driver and Rafe (surely Rafe) intensified his fright all the more. In fact, this telescoped his fears, for he felt, with every nerve stripped to the quick, that they had planned for him some kind of special punishment. Perhaps, he dared to think, he may be a victim of mistaken identity.

But that possibility could not help him either, for if they considered him someone else, then he would suffer that person's fate.

He was halted before the chief, still bound, standing with his feet close together, in military fashion, his chin tilted slightly upwards, with what remaining dignity and courage he had. His long blond hair was in tangles, damp about his face and neck, and he felt sorely ill-kept.

There were great mutterings around the circle of spectators; farther out, children whimpered, dogs kept up a constant barking, and a number of warriors, seated on the bare, red earth, beat out a throbbing tempo on crude drums of dried skins, stretched over hollow logs and gourds.

The chief raised one bony arm to indicate his request for attention, and it was immediately granted. He looked at Vik—a long, questioning look. Looked deep into his eyes, his brows all but dousing their faint glitter.

“Why have you returned to the land of the Choctaw and the Chickasaw, oh, great being of the white eyes?” the old man asked in his lisping voice with the tongue of the white man. “Upon what mission do you come from the land of the mighty Inca? We, like the dogs of the Timberlost, have waited many moons . . . ah! as many moons as there are pebbles in the Yalobusha.”

“I do not know what you mean, kind sir,” Vik stammered, adding that last endearment for his own safety. He hated addressing this heathen with respect, but for the moment he had no alternative.

“Are you in disguise?” the chief asked as if

ignoring Vik's answer completely. "In the camps of the paleface, not wanting your godliness to be recognized—as on that great march of tears many moons ago when you journeyed with my father and my father's father before him?"

Vik was still puzzled, but he was indeed wise enough, despite his acute fright, to put wisdom to work. He knew now that they held him in some kind of awe, and that if he could hold on to his courage he might, with some effort and imagination, turn that other man's destiny into his own salvation. After all, he *was* an actor, and this could well be his most important role, the part which might save his own life.

He had nothing to lose . . .

"For the safety of the great Choctaw nation I must not betray my identity to the pale-face," he managed the lie, a dangerous lie. Upon it, he gambled, not only his life, but, unknowingly, every life in Mississippi.

The old chief looked at him with eyes that suddenly blinked, fiery bright for his age; stirred once more with alert youthfulness.

"Then . . . you are Sky Eyes?"

"I am he," Vik answered lowly, wondering who "he" was.

A great hum went up among the savages. Even the old chief joined in, as everyone, from babe to man, bowed their faces to the red dirt. A low humming began among them, almost of mournful import. It made Vik feel extremely uncomfortable for the moment, chilled by a feeling of mystery.

"I am Chief Escatawpa," the old man stated

tremulously, after the solemn salutation had been carried out to its finish. "Great grandson of Chief Hushpuckena, the Incan warrior you led out of the land of the golden sun; him with all his people who escaped the dreadful Cortez and his awsome sword. You, Sky Eyes, took the lead on the trail of tears . . . as you well know. I speak of that noble deed as a symbol of what you have done for my people, bringing us to this green land of sunshine and moist earth and silver water." He glanced once at all these elemental things, then with watering eyes, back to Vik. "Now you return to us. We must feast, and you must wear the robes of your ancestral gods, so we may look upon your greatness, and bow our faces to the dirt where dogs have trod in keeping with our little size." He pointed to Vik's deer-hide trunk, its contents spilled upon the soft grass, at the crimson robe edged in sable, the brass-and-velvet crown, the scepter . . . the costume he was to wear in Henry the Eighth.

At a sign from the chief, the two warriors took up the robe and placed it upon Vik's trembling shoulders, but shoulders a little steadier now in his new role of ancestral *god*. Feeling that he must attempt some plausible, god-like gesture, he swung the heavy silk-lined robe in one full sweep, theatrically, held it out at arms length, and made a graceful bow. But as he did so, a lance, with a flaming feather dancing at the tip struck the hem of the robe, pinned it to the earth. Looking up, he saw the most handsome man he had ever seen in his life, not a white man like Rafe, but an Indian, one of these savages.

His dazzling presence dimmed even the brilliant morning light trapped in the alcove of glittering maples. The man was young, naked, save for only a breechcloth of flaming seeds stitched to a rabbit pelt. Unlike the other lithe warriors of the Choctaw nation, this man was huge, extremely broad of shoulder—powerful—his muscles rippling like those of a stalking panther. His naked thighs, forearms gleamed like water running over smooth stones. Amazingly, black, wiry hair furred his chest, curled in one black line down to his navel where it spread in wild profusion. Hair, crisp, curling, lay over his thighs and calves, and came to a thickness about his ankles. The hair on his head, of identical texture, was parted in the center, like the fashion of the Choctaw, and cascaded down each side of his face in plaits of rawhide. One feather, as red as if dipped in blood, stood above one ear, slipped into a band of bright beads about his head. Beads and eagle claws made a formidable circlet about his dark neck. And his eyes, as they burned ferociously on Vik, were as black and shiny as muscadines in dewy leaves.

“Sky Eyes! By the gods of Abba Inca!” he roared, his huge hands spread wide, his powerful legs spread as if to spring, “This pale-face dog! One stroke of the lance and his blood will flow like the white man’s blood.”

There was a great roar among the spectators. The old chief, wobbling to his feet, came and stood before the young Indian, his old eyes, fixed, hard, stark.

“My son, Neshoba!” he barked, all but spit-

ting flame. "Has the war-path dulled your wisdom? Or have you been eating the evil berry of the Pipsissewa? Bow to Sky Eyes—for this is now holy ground."

The Indian called Neshoba returned the stare, more fiercely than his aged father.

"I will bow to none but Abba Inca."

"But this is Abba Inca," the old man uttered in a tremulous voice, putting out a hand reluctantly, as if to touch a golden halo about Vik's person. "Abba Inca in new form."

"He is no God, father of my people, Escatawpa of my own flesh," the young prince cried, standing firm. "I watched him from my hiding place but two suns ago in the white man's fort. He slept beside the white man called Rafe, scout from the land of the pale-face."

Vik went limp. He wondered, shocked, if this young giant had spied on him and Rafe!

"No god would sleep in the blankets of a white man."

"Sky Eyes has come to us in robes of the pale-face," the old man whined, "to breach the evil desert of the white man—to reach the land of the Choctaw without mortal harm."

"He comes as all white men," the prince said defiantly, "braving the width of our hunting-grounds to reach the three great waters. And this one is like them, grabbing for the golden iron in the northern cities from which the wild duck comes. I heard as much from Shirttail but one sun since. This one works strange medicine—changing himself into many forms for white men to gaze upon and wonder, like our dancing

warriors who fill us with strange fires."

The old chief looked at Vik, then at his son.

"Neshoba, be it so. But has not this Sky Eyes appeared before us, as I dreamed but five darknesses ago? Did not I tell you then, my son, that one would come among us with fair hair and skin, and eyes like the cloudless sky?" He pointed at Vik. "Here is full truth of my dream —my prophecy."

Neshoba gave his ancient father a grave look. His dark eyes hardened, like the flints of arrowheads. His unrelenting gaze then fell on Vik, held like thorns in the breast of the rock dove.

"True, you did speak of the coming of Sky Eyes, father. But you are old and feeble and beset with false visions. The evil ghosts of Hush-puckena run in your watered blood, and bring upon you this sickness of the spirit. This squamale is a white one, and must be dealt with as his own brothers deal with him." Neshoba paused, allowed his smoldering dark gaze to run the length of Vik's figure, almost with wanton heat. "Give this one to me, father. And I will punish him as his own kind would punish him."

"No!" the chief cried, his bony frame beginning to tremble. "Do not deny me my god in my autumn years—the tepee of my spirit. We will build for Sky Eyes a tepee of snow white pelts, line it with softness—feathers of emerald from the pintail duck, and make his nest of the down from the snow owl. We will floor it with wings from the hawk, and before him each day place our best melons, pumpkins, beans, wild rice, striped oranges, maize, nuts from the great for-

ests to the west, and berries from the snake vines where the waters flow purest. In his pallet, when darkness comes, we will make sweet the nest with the scents of fragrant petals and buds of the golden Sumac. And no man shall go near him save those who serve him, and no squaw shall tempt him with her smooth belly and breasts, and any brave who may touch him shall die by the bite of the serpent."

"No! No!" shouted Neshoba, so loudly and so suddenly, and with such wrath Vik jumped. "He is mine. Give him to me!"

"He is a god," the old chief shouted, determined. "I have spoken." He made a small nod to Vik. "And I am the law."

Neshoba, now fired with rage, glared at his father as if he was going to strike him.

"You are old and sick and your skull swarms with the crazy bees of Sosebee Cove! You defy our true god, Abba Inca, thrusting this false god upon the Choctaw nation. He is but a man, this pale-face with the yellow hair. He is but flesh and blood and must be used as such."

The old chief lifted his trembling chin, the gaudy feathers of his chieftan's bonnet quivering in the dawn breeze.

"Sky Eyes is a God. I have spoken. I am chief of the Hiwannee and the Kewanee tribes. All who abide in the tepees beside the waters, who till my lands, who kill my meat, who ride to slay the white man, must obey me."

"You are no longer chief!" Neshoba half-screamed, in a blind rage. He lifted both arms, their powerful lengths strung with wiry sinews,

his arm pits a nest of shining black hair. His fingers were spread wide, curved in like an eagle's claws. His dark eyes burned, his expression murderous. "I am young and strong, and the time has come for me to sit in the chair of snake-hide. You have spoken law for the last time, father of the vanquished. Neshoba is now chief of the Hiwannee and Kewannee!"

"Only if my own blood spills upon this sand!" the old chief retorted in his dedication to his mantle of leadership.

The crowd grew hushed.

Vik could hardly draw breath, so paralyzed was he, the victim of these two warriors' wills . . . wills he could not fathom. He could but wait, and pray for his life.

"And only if mine spills with yours," came a deep, dark voice from the melee, as a brave advanced, put a warm hand on the old chief's shoulders.

"Wenasoga, my son," the old man whispered, his expression beautiful with love. "Faithful as a lap-dog. Wish by the gods of Abba Inca your brother Neshoba was so faithful to his place. But he is like the wild horse and the fox and the snake."

"He lusts also for the wampum of the flesh," added Wenasoga, the other son.

Neshoba's eyes narrowed. Vik saw his muscles tense, magnifying his savage beauty as the faint light played along them.

"Do not stand between me and the chief's bonnet," Neshoba said to Wenasoga. "Do not play the fool before our father to beg favors, like

a woman. I am young and strong and I will surely kill you."

"Kill me then," cried Wenasoga, slipping a tomahawk from a thong about his loins.

Neshoba drew his, as moans sounded through the throng. The tribes moved back, automatically widening the circle.

"Wait!" the chief said, lifting both arms. "I will not see my only sons fighting each other. It is love of you that has fed my body's strength. If you kill one another I will surely perish through starvation of my heart. Only the mourning dove will speak to me then with its empty voice."

"The time has come!" growled Neshoba, lifting his tomahawk.

"I have waited long enough," grunted the other, raising his weapon, ready and eager for battle.

"No! No!" the old man moaned, leaning on Vik for support. And he pled piteously: "Sky Eyes . . . save them. Save them!"

At this call to his specious godhead, Vik felt every nerve go taut. What was he to say? What was he to do? He knew nothing of this Sky Eyes, this Abba Inca, and less of the deportment required of a god. But he had to do something, he knew, and quickly!

"I will strengthen the hand of the noble one," he said to the old man, which brought a gleam to his eyes. "The one who is at fault must die."

The old man accepted this word, but sorrowfully, and the people stood muted, awed, so the brothers prepared for conflict to the death. Bodies bent, arms twined in vice-like grips, their

powerful naked legs thrashing the red dust, they were like giant elks battling for females during mating season. Now and then a tomahawk would find its target of flesh, leaving a crimson stain, followed by a scream of rage and pain. In the excitement, a number of the dogs joined in, barking, snapping at naked ankles and legs which added greatly to the violence, the terror, the nightmare air of the conflict.

As Vik stood fixed, rigid, awaiting the fatal outcome, he discovered himself betting on Neshoba, though he could not tell why ... since surely Neshoba had already fashioned in his savage mind a terrible fate for him. Perhaps it was the man himself, and not his motives, which instilled in Vik's consciousness this contrary prejudice. It was certain he felt a great physical admiration for this dark and dexterous savage. The way he leaped and pivoted, despite his giant frame, the way his naked flesh gleamed in the half-light, the way he moved out of the way of his opponent, then striking back again, with ferocious agility like a huge, dark cat caused Vik to glue his gaze on him.

He had never witnessed such masculine quality before in his life, a quality so equally balanced over the length and breath of one masculine frame. If there could be a comparison, the likeness of Neshoba to a stallion fighting for its life, or a sleek panther, fully matured, gleaming with savage health, made the more magnificent by the fierce rage of battle, when every nerve and muscle is forced to full strength—when the best of animal or man becomes obvious—

magnified by his fighting will, his dexterity, his beauty in combat for his very life.

When the end came, it was swift-lethal. Neshoba's tomahawk, hissing through the air in the last murderous cut as he lay on his back before the charging Wenasoga, buried its keen edge in the naked flesh of Wenasoga's groin, spilling his bowels in the dust. Wenasoga gave one great shout of pain and surprise—hands grabbing his guts as he slumped to his knees to fall face down, his arms and legs spread limply.

As Neshoba rose the victor, his magnificent body shining with sweat and blood, his breath rasping, his eyes burning, his nostrils flaring like a wild animal, he looked at Vik who watched him almost with inner pride, the true prince in supreme triumph.

The old chief, crushed by his grief, his face a mass of wrinkles, hobbled to Wenasoga as he lay in the bloody dust, the feathers on his bonnet shivering in the breeze like the maple leaves overhead.

"Wenasoga! Wenasoga!" he cried, dropping to his knees and rocking back and forth, howling, like a wolf at the moon.

A soft hum went over the crowd. A crow, in a near by sycamore, let out a sharp, grating caw.

In that instant Vik sensed in the mighty Neshoba a demand; found that the victor was looking at him with hypnotic intensity—as if they were being drawn into one another by a force equal in energy to the intensity of their locked eyes. And neither, it seemed, could free himself from this powerful spell.

They were motionless under the rigid bond of an animal attraction—bound to a fate neither understood, but totally aware of, and responsive to the tremendous force of that pull.

Vik knew that something, either of nature or of man, was carrying out its orders to bring his life and this savage's life together as one; that their emotions and essence and beings would intermingle and, together, combined and blending, would bring about complete alteration of his life. He knew and felt this acutely, as this dark, primitive giant pulled at Vik's spirit with his intense gaze, his physical aura which wrapped Vik in its magnitude, its forceful emission of desire and will.

After the old chief had ordered the body of Wenasoga removed to a near-by hut, he came up to Vik very slowly, carefully, his body straightening to its full height, his narrow eyes but slits, cold, hostile.

"Neshoba was right," he said, his teeth clenched, his jaw set. "You are a false god. You are not Sky Eyes who sang of his coming in my dreams. The good has been destroyed, while the evil still lives. The true Sky Eyes would have made no such choice, had he been the true god."

Vik looked at him, but for all the faith he had so quickly destroyed in this ancient savage, he could not summon one word he might fashion into answer.

Neshoba, his body more erect, more dominant than before, came to stand beside Vik, his black eyes, ominous as a hawk's, hot on those of his father.

"I am still chief of the Hiwannee and the Kewanee," the old man said, not looking at Neshoba, but directly at Vik, a look that could have killed. "If you are but a brother of the white man your fate in this camp with my son Neshoba will be a fate worse than a thousand deaths. And if you are a god, then, till the longest day you dwell on the walkways of earth, you will regret you chose the wrong brother for death. Neshoba is willful and evil, and he will, with his evil, make you evil, too. You will go down with him into the dust. You will crawl with him like the snake. You will eat the bitter fruit of the Ginseng and grow crazy with desire. You will come to smoke the leaves of the deertongue. You will see many colors when you eat from the gingerbread tree and the roots of witch hazel. Neshoba will make of you a dark, evil wound which will run venom from all four sides." He paused, glanced over the village, to the river, then the sky. "Though I am still chief I have lost my lance and my tomahawk —my faithful Wenasoga. Now may Abba Inca take pity on your plight."

"Quiet, old man of the lynx ears," Neshoba commanded gruffly. "Prepare to sip the venom of the Bloodroot and die in peace, or else shall I have you bound with wet rawhide and bitten by the grass snake. I do not yearn to put you to death, since you are the great Escatawpa, but the Hiwannee and the Kewanee will grow old and womanish like you if their chief is not replaced by a young brave."

The old man looked once at him, a direct look, blinked a tear.

“I choose to die in peace,” he said meekly, turning and wobbling to his tent.

Neshoba, taking Vik roughly by the wrist, jerked him to attention, and dragged him along behind his great, silent stride.

“You are mine, one of the yellow hair and sky eyes,” Neshoba said, his voice deep, guttural. “Come—my tepee is waiting!”

Chapter Six

The Tepee in which Vik was placed was enormous, the numerous ribs towering skyward, and overlaid with cow and deer hides. In the center a sunken hearth of ashes lay smoldering, on which were piled several chunks of hickory, the spice-laden smoke lazily drifting up through the opened flap in the roof. Around the fire, Vik noticed, was a circle of limestones, some flat, which formed tables on which lay dishes made from gourds and hollowed-out slabs of wood. In these were wild-rice, dry and flat, hunks of beef, melons, various nuts and berries, and venison. Above the flames rose a spit on which cuts of meat sizzled, juices dripping into the coals and giving off explosive puffs on impact. From the tepee ribs were draped brightly threaded tapes-tries, war bonnets, hemp ropes, leather thongs, crude satchels, lances, shields. Hanging from one

were hundreds of beads, many glass ones from the white man's world, and many of threaded berry and stone. These caught the smoky light, winked back emeralds, scarlets, rubies, pearl, and they clattered, as the cold morning breeze crept in from the wide tent flap. Along one inner wall, Vik spied western saddles, bright blankets, bridles embossed with beaten silver, whips, gloves. And the entire flooring was made snug and warm by many overlays of thick pelts, spotted ones of cowhide, tawny ones of deer and bear, and small cushions thrown loosely about stitched from squirrel and rabbit and muskrat. These were so heaped together they created an enormous bed, and it was to this cushion of fur . . . these glorious coats of forest beasts . . . that Neshoba pushed Vik roughly.

Neshoba stood over him, his great stature towering like a fearsome god, his lithe arms resting on his hips, his powerful, dark legs spread. His eyes, as he gazed down at Vik, were filled with deep longing, and glistened like the garlands of strung beads behind him. So majestic a creature in this wilderness, surrounded by these other savages, he summoned a surge of admiration from Vik's uplifted glance, yet this admiration failed to thaw his fear of the savage. Vik was thoroughly frightened, and he sensed this powerful Indian brave realized this fear.

Neshoba kept his silence, just looked, as if debating some hidden torture—in his wild and questing mind, or through some instinct of kindness, allowed Vik the privilege of gauging his surroundings.

And as Vik did so, he was acutely aware of the strong scents within the cowhide walls, the stench of muck, of melon rind, of cooking beef, of tanned hide, of urine, the mingling of them all thickened by the smoke, the fur, and impregnated with the unmistakable odor of sexual, aphrodisiac rancidity.

Too, there was a distinct smell about Neshoba, an odor mixed with dried skin and sweat, of leather and horseflesh, and most of all, the aura of male, the essence of the savage.

"What do they call you, Sky Eyes?" Neshoba asked after a long interval of surveying Vik with hungry, feral eyes.

Vik looked up at him.

"Vik Alta."

"You may cover over that name like the snow erases the dogtooth flower."

"Why so?" Vik braved to ask.

"From this time onward you shall be Sky Eyes, but not as the god my father, chief Escatawpa thought, but as a man . . . a slave . . . as it is said in the white man's world. You will do my bidding as I will you to it. You will obey me the same as any squaw. You belong to me, Neshoba, chief of the Hiwannee and the Kewanee, for on the next dawn my father will drink of the blood-root and die."

With quiet, trembling voice, Vik asked, rising up on one elbow.

"What do you intend to do with me?"

Neshoba breathed heavily, his long black mane hanging down each side of his face making him all the more fierce and forbidding—like the

crow, a thing of beauty in its cloak of blackness.

"I saw you and the scout Rafe in the room at Fort Adams," he answered directly, his eyes, their lights enormous, fathomless in their gaze into Vik's.

"I wanted you then, that night of the full moon and with the singing of the nuthatch . . . as I want you now!"

"Never!" Vik cried, as the thought of the pain, delivered upon him even by Rafe, ground against his brain. He had endured it with Rafe only through some inner need of his nature he could not explain . . . but with this barbarian! Never! "I'd die first," he went on, as fear built up in him, tapped every nerve. "I'll kill myself first, like your father."

"You will do no killing," Neshoba assured him. Reaching down, he took several strands of Vik's blond hair in his fingers and caressed it fondly. "I will guard you from moon to moon. If you do not give freely, then you shall be bound and taken. The short-eared cat of the swamps fights with tooth and fang against the wants of the male, but she mates and bears and mates again."

Vik gave him a hateful glare, his expression fixed, his teeth clenched.

"You and your men overturned the stage, killed the driver, and Rafe! You will have to kill me first, before I'll let you lay a hand on my body!" He half-screamed the words, doing little to frighten the dark, swarthy animal who crouched above him. Vik realized, with every nerve in his body tensed to the full, that he was

truthfully powerless before the lustful whims of this savage. If this Neshoba wanted him, then Neshoba would take him. And here lay Vik's terror. The thought of the pain made him physically sick, and every fiber of his determination went limp, cowering under the persistent will of this satyr in Indian garb.

Neshoba, inflamed now, pulled Vik towards him.

"Don't touch me, you filthy pig!" Vik screamed, and in his tortured mind ran wild, beautiful glimpses of Rafe, his warm love, his wondrous passion, and he cried: "Rafe! Rafe! Help me—help me!" but he knew it was futile. He was at the mercy of this lava-colored giant, and there were no ears in all the world to hear him, or care.

Surprisingly Neshoba dropped his hands, rose, and stood towering above him like some dark and mysterious phantom.

"I must bind you then," he said. "As the black spiders bind the maise in our harvest fields."

He went to the tent entrance, pulled back the flap, tied it securely. The interior lapsed immediately into Stygian gloom, with only the fire-light in the circular hearth flooding the hide walls with fiery gold. Only a splinter of light came in the vent.

Jerking several strips of rawhide from one nearby pole, Neshoba returned to Vik's side. Without a word he stripped off Vik's clothes. Then, mumbling some kind of sing-song incantation, he fondled Vik's legs, his chest, his thighs,

running his huge dark hands over every part of him, examining, exploring every inch of him. When he had done this thoroughly, as if Vik were a beautiful gem dipped up from crystal water pools, he tied each wrist with rawhide, tied his ankles and, flipping Vik on his stomach, drew the strips tightly from tent pole to pole, until Vik's body lay spread eagled, his chest and belly touching the fur bed softly.

Vik, his head twisted painfully, watched and dreaded Neshoba's every move, knowing what was soon to follow. In stark terror he watched as Neshoba stood to his full height, untied the cord at his loin and let his breechcloth slip to the floor. At the sight of him naked, his great body bathed in the firelight, the gold reflections touching his thighs, his broad chest, Vik went limp. His curious eyes found the dark area around Neshoba's straddle, and there his gaze lingered, held. The hair on Neshoba's body, curled and underlined with shadows from the firelight, magnifying the coarseness, lay over his groin like the matted hair on the rump of a male sheep, but black, crow black. And from this kingdom of hair hung his organ, huge as the limb of a tree, its enormous scarlet head shaped like the head of a cat, strung with huge veins, and the color of the cones of the sugar pine. His nuts, swinging free of his thighs, were like gourds still on the vine, round and smooth and gleaming in the scattered light.

All this Vik saw in a glance, studied it, panicked by it, for as he watched, the huge organ began to come to life, rising like a cotton-mouth

moccasin aroused by the threat of attack, slowly lifting its shiny head until, hard as the young cones of the Balsam fir, it slapped menacingly against Neshoba's naval. It was a weapon to Vik's young eyes, Neshoba's battering ram of attack, and he knew this savage giant would use his weapon to the ultimate of his desires. An organ of love or of torture, it would penetrate to the very hilt—to bless or curse.

"My horn will gore you like the horn of my stallion gores the wild mares, but you will know no pain, only the size of it, and you will not cry out nor faint," said Neshoba, taking his organ in his hand, stripping it back and forth, deliberately, meaningfully, as if to advertise his endowment—as if he wanted Vik to measure its proportions with his eyes and his heart and his soul, to comprehend what portion of his own body would have to give way for its turgid penetration.

Neshoba then reached down, took hold of his nuts and bounced them in the cup of his hand, as if weighing them. He pulled them to their full length, like pulling at the udders of a cow, until their thin-skinned sac glistened taut; gave a rutting moan and spread his legs so Vik could get a better look. Unabashed, without modesty, bold as an uninhibited animal that will feed his sex hunger in the presence of his fellows, he displayed his mighty organ to Vik's frightened eyes.

"My two seeds of life," Neshoba growled, his voice low, audible, "have as many sons in their core, as there are seeds in a melon. It is from these," and he held them outwards, "that the

precious venom will spurt into your own body, but you will bear me no sons, for you are my pleasure. Let the old and young squaws carry my children in their bellies until the time comes to drop them on the earth, but not you, Sky Eyes . . . not you. I will not poison and bloat your body like a dead cow's rotting in the sun. I will keep your small body beautiful. I will preserve you, like I preserve the does I kill with my bow, so that, like doe-meat, I will have you for my pleasures when the hunger of my body wills it. You are mine, Sky Eyes. You will never leave this land of the Hiwannee nor the Kewanee, unless I take you with me."

As Neshoba talked, he unplaited his hair, unlaced the brightly dyed stripes of leather, and shook his head when the task was done, sending his dark mane loosely down around his neck and shoulders. He went to the fire, cupped up a handfull of hogfat from a gourd and rubbed it over his body in front, oiling his organ and nuts, rubbing the white stench of the grease along his inner thighs, his chest, until his naked body took on the appearance of a water-reed shining in the sun. He then knelt between Vik's outstretched thighs, slapped some of the fat along his buttocks, his inner muscles, gouged out Vik's rectum with long, hard fingers, probing the opening for his turgid organ. His long fingers went deep, causing Vik to squirm, as they searched, mapping the way for the dark weapon that was soon to invade him. He rose, after a half hour of this, and rubbed both their bodies with crushed leaves of the Pickerel weed, and the scented petals of

the spotted Cranesbill.

"Sky Eyes, you are as soft as the tongues of the Stewartia," Neshoba whispered, bending low over him, feeling his loins, running his greasy hands around his waistline, underneath to his flat belly. "As pithy as the lips of the Pinesap, as mellow as persimmon, ripe and all golden in the dew. A young doe, quivering from fear, a soft rabbit scurrying for freedom, bright as the buds of the Lobelia, and as beautiful in my hungry eyes. You are meat for my body, solace for my mind, the perfume for my spirit. You will dwell in my wants, live for my pleasures, for the god of Abba Inca has sent you to me, for I am now chief Neshoba, guard over the tribes of the Hi-wannee and the Kewanee, and a chief must have for his squash of the flesh the fairest in the land, the most beautiful love-doe in the forest."

Humping then up and over Vik's quivering body, a body wracked from fear, from the tension of every driven nerve, Neshoba lay against him, feeling him, his hot animal breath blowing on the nape of Vik's neck, his hard thighs bruising Vik's outstretched limbs. Then, with one sure stroke Neshoba's rigid horn spread the soft tissues of Vik's rectum and, by that one touch triggered some electric charge, something essential and desperately vital, sinking its scarlet hole.

The thrust tightened every vein in Vik's body, drew back his head, arched his back like a quivering bow when the arrow has left the rawhide, forced a muffled scream.

"Rafe! Rafe! save me—save me," he moaned, his cries mingled with the low, animal moans

coming from Neshoba's singing lips.

"Do not call for the white scout," Neshoba demanded, gripping Vik's squirming shoulders with hard, firm hands. "He lies dead on the trail of the Natchez, a tomahawk in his skull. My horn has gored you, so you are mine, Sky Eyes, mine to keep."

Inflamed with passion now, his huge body taking on the air of an animal in some nightmare struggle, Neshoba lifted his burning groin, brought it down ferociously, drawing Vik's every nerve to the center of his rectum, like the threads of the spider's web find their connection in the middle of the circle. Strangely, as Neshoba had surmised, Vik began to feel no pain. The only pain he had felt was the fear of pain, the mental agony which had pierced his sentience but not in his rectum. The natural, steady thrusts of Neshoba's dark, powerful body above him, with its coarse rhythms, its bold, physical hunger, moved over the smallness of Vik like stormclouds over a tiny leaf, threatening to destroy it, to cast it into oblivion; moving like a shaft of oil in a funnel of oil, moving with such erratic pressures, such swaying of groin, such girating of bone and muscle that Vik, cloaked in human darkness anticipated a breaking of pain, like the breaking of the bread of Moses after belated, anguished prayers. But the pain did not come. Neshoba went on and on, giving, taking, siphoning with his huge dark horn rapt ecstacies from Vik's soft pillow of flesh, from the hot pit of his buttocks, which resembled two brown buns taken from a warm oven, the very core, the very

heart of Neshoba's hunger.

Then, after an immeasurably long interval, of having his body crushed beneath this thrusting giant, this dark mystery, Vik, both with mind and body, began to succumb, began to willingly surrender to this savage warrior's intentions. Suddenly he began to enjoy being taken, relished the enormous organ driving through his flesh and nerves, discovering in this primitive ritual something which was giving him new life, thrills, ecstasy. The huge groping hands, loving in their brutal hardness, the rigid thighs chafing his grease-slicked thighs, the huge round seeds in their plastic sling knocking against his seeds, like two pine boles knocking against each other in a gale; the organ itself churning his rectum to butter, the long mane of black hair draped over his neck, the hot breath, the mournful animal sighs, told him maddening, wondrous things, galvanized him into life, awoke his passion, his own physical desires.

He began to help Neshoba in his sex march, lifting his own groin, girating his pelvis, twisting as if jointed in the middle by a single thread, a puppet dangling by the taut strips of rawhide, bringing guttural moans of satisfaction from Neshoba's panting throat, as each breath, one overlapping the other, increased his passion, until, with that last prolonged thrust, making a home for his seed, Neshoba spermed, flooding Vik with the elixir of life.

His panting breath hot on Vik's neck, Neshoba lay limp, warm and limp as candle wax on warm stones. His hands, loving with each stroke,

slid around Vik's body, fondling, caressing, recalling with their steady touch the memory of sex, passion.

"You are now a part of me," Neshoba said softly, murmuring like a contented child. "For the noble blood of the Hiwannee is mixed with your blood. My horn has spat its silver venom. My seeds are burning, still in want for you, and my limbs ache, each tendon stretched with longing. I want to press you to my lips, lick the pigfat with my tongue, until my tongue has licked every part of you. I want to wash you clean, like the raccoon washes persimmons in the shallows. I want to taste you with my tongue. I want to swallow you, like the sly snow owl swallows worms."

Lifting himself off Vik's limp body, he rose and, taking the silver bladed knife of the white man from a black leather scabbard, he came back. Bending on one knee, gracefully, cut Vik's bonds. He began to whimper like a beaten, cur-dog, his huge dark shoulders shaking in convulsions.

"Like a frightened squaw I had to bind you with the skins of my kill," he moaned, his thick black mane draped wildly over his downcast face, his liquid eyes. "Had to take you like my white stallion Dove takes the spotted pony, when . . . when you would have given yourself to me willingly, like the sun gives its warmth to the thistle, though the thistle is like a wolf's fangs, like the faithful squaw gives her body to the father of her sons."

"Do not weep, Neshoba," Vik found himself

saying, stroking back the long mane from Neshoba's tear-stained face, the image of Rafe now a far off memory in the back of his heart. "If I make you happy—then . . ."

"You make me very proud," Neshoba sighed, interrupting. "You make me real chief of the Hiwannee and the Kewanee in my bursting heart. You fill me with great fighting spirit, make me conquer many nations. You fill my day with sunlight and bright waters, touch my spirit with your fire, burn away my old life, give me back new life all shining—shining like the iron gold of my ancestors who came from Montezuma the land of the golden sun."

Turning Vik over, his hot, savage lips running amuck, Neshoba began the melodious task of washing Vik with his burning tongue. Slowly, deliberate, thoroughly, he crept into every crevice of Vik's willing form—his ankles, between his toes, by the shapely limbs, limbs with short golden hair, into his navel sharply, to his organ, lapping like a dog at a bone, sucking at his nuts, pulling, lolling over them with his revolving tongue, then back to his organ, letting his liver-colored lips move over the thick head, his tongue feeling out the crevices beneath it, stripping it to the bed of hair, taking in its every dimension drinking with his hot hungry lips every fathom of it, all the while blowing the hot breath from his lung in deep, gutteral intonations, whining like a frightened pup one moment purring like a drowsy kitten the next, siphoning from Vik the most precious nectar of his nobleness, hungrily sucking like a calf at its mother, demanding,

with his tongue trilling with rapture, the rapture that would follow if he continued. And he did continue, all the while allowing his huge hard hands to roam, caressing Vik's chest, his nipples, into his naval, touching his neck, his lips, then down again like a suddenly desperate serpent, entwining his muscular arms around Vik's thighs, drawing his buttocks into firm, swift hands.

It was too much, this savage eating away his being; this black maned savage whose brown body was more beautiful than any god's, erasing Vik's morals, his convictions with serpent-like tongue, effacing his past desires by his mouth, urgently hunting every crevice of joy, dripping saliva onto his belly, his organ, sucking it up again and again until Vik, resisting until he could not resist one more moment, spermed, shooting his nectar of life into Neshoba's waiting mouth. He heard Neshoba swallow, one deep throaty gulp, felt the tension of his huge savage arms relax, felt the essence of his warm breathing as he lay still in the hollow of his crotch, that heathen breath now to Vik more sweet than all the hippocras in the world.

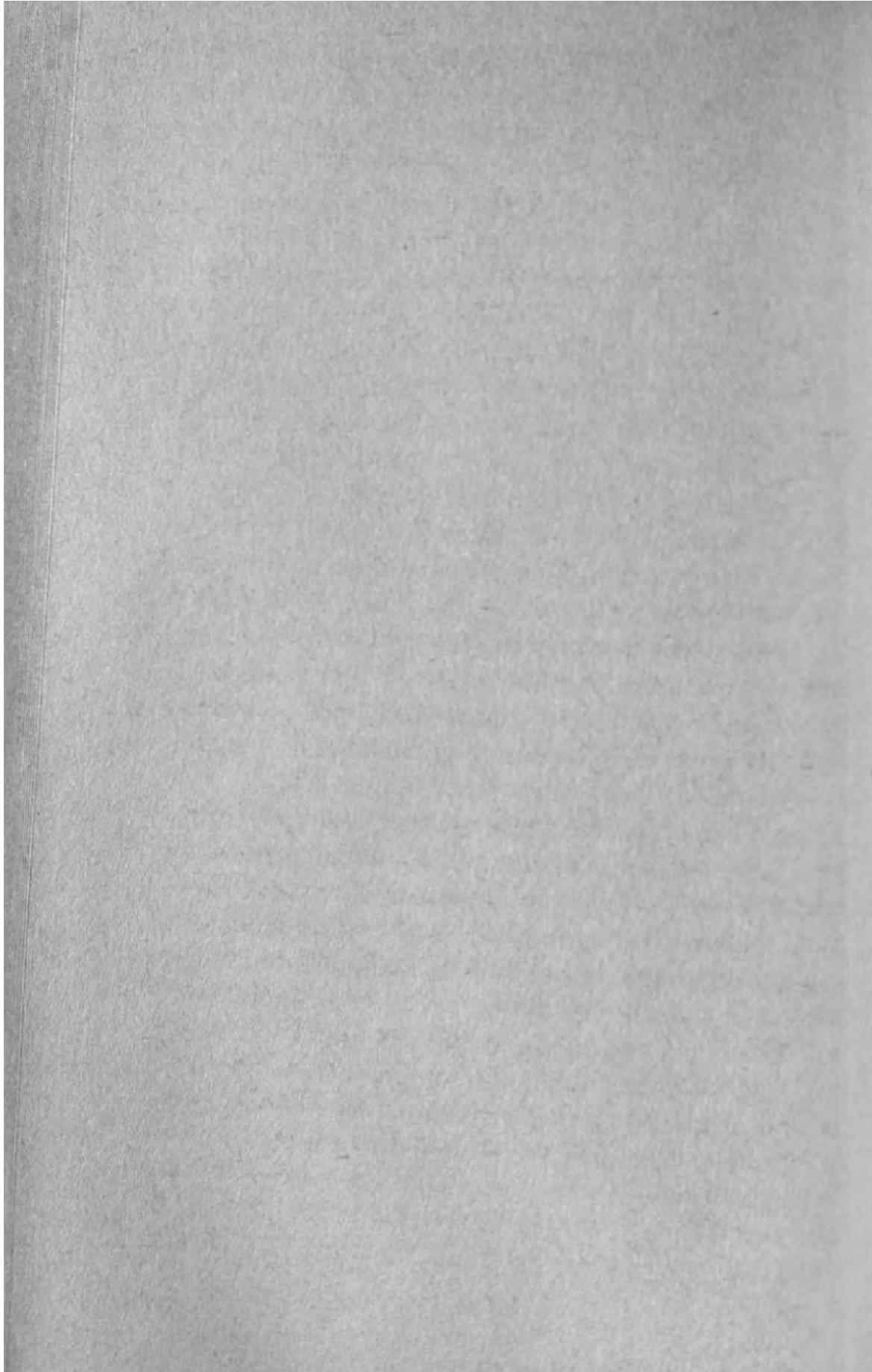
And as they lay there spent with passion, their bodies graceful and sublime in their closeness, entwined on the enormous lap of fur, Vik, somehow, did not mind the smoke-filled tent, the firelight over their nakedness, covering them with gold—did not mind, in fact found primitive glory in the rancid smell of leather and dung and woodbark and hickory smoke and food rotting in this mouldy darkness. Neither did he mind, nor

loathe, the smell of Neshoba beside him . . . the smell of pigfat and sweat and sperm and the stale effluvia of thighs tainted from riding the lathered white stallion; nor Neshoba's long black mane soiled with dust of the trail, pollen from the low hung limbs of trees, from the blood of the kill which he had wiped from his hands there afterwards.

And as he lay with this wild male of the wilderness, engulfed in the rich male smell of him, cloaked in his dark brown nakedness in the firelight, he listened to the sounds outside: the squaws beating the golden maize into meal, small Indian children laughing and squealing as they played the chunky game, dogs barking, horses neighing, chickens cackling, the chatter of crows in the towering sycamores, the mutter of flowing water. And sadly he thought of home in New Orleans, the theatre, his plays, the civilized world, and Rafe . . . where was Rafe?

All that seemed lost to him now, a dream from out of his childhood, something he had never lived, but rather had imagined, something fanciful, self-wrought, like a poem or a song. Vik felt that this was the real life, had been all his living days, something he had once lost long ago, and now had mercifully found.

"You have robbed me of my god," Neshoba murmured, his dark face buried in Vik's neck. "The god of Abba Inca is dead. You are my god now, Sky Eyes," and breathing heavily, sighed, "forevermore."



Chapter Seven

Canadian geese, in great winged echelons, flew overhead, heralding the approach of winter—true winter, which in but a few short weeks would bring to this country snow and ice, wind and storm.

The sumac trees plumed the forests with gold, pinesap burned on the naked slopes, lush persimmon fell for the possum and the Choctaw children, crabapples lay mellow in the hidden leaves, ginseng was uprooted to be boiled for winter sickness, sassafras roots dug and dried for steaming brews, nuts gathered by the Indian women and girls, and the wild scarlet bergamot, the last of the flowering wilds, folded their petals, prepared for the dreadful onslaught to come.

In this beautiful, mournful season—Indian summer actually—Vik abided in the tepee of Neshoba, a prisoner yet not a prisoner. Under

Neshoba's guidance and wisdom, were passed on to Vik at times, precious bits of information about his people. Vik learned much about the Choctaw nation—the heathens he had once feared more than anything on earth, with the exception of god and the devil. These symbols were gone from him now, in that other world, the civilized world to which he no longer belonged. He no longer needed god, he reasoned, for he knew now that if god dwelled anywhere in eternity it was here in this beautiful primitive land, in the hearts of these beautiful people.

He learned that the Choctaw people were semi-sedentary in character, a people gifted with a knack for fishing, hunting, and agriculture. They farmed, tilled the rich loam with crude implements, and at this season busied themselves with their harvest, the fruit of their labors: corn, beans, pumpkins, squash, melons, deertongue leaves for smoking, striped oranges for juices and drying, apples for soaking in brine or whipped into sauces and jellies, and rewarding harvest of wild-rice. In addition to their domestic efforts they were skilled hunters, bagging with bow, lance and crude traps, deer, black bear, squirrel, rabbit, wild cattle and birds of every description. Fish plentifully invested the river and the chattering brooks, and they could be caught by hand, dried in the sun, or baked in sumac leaves for winter's hunger.

They never idled their time. From dawn till sunset they toiled at something: harvesting, fishing, hunting, working skins into leather, stringing berries and shells into beautiful strands

—one of their great delights for adornment . . . wove split oak baskets and hampers; made winter garments, rebuilt tepees; created drums and shields and whetted their arrowheads into knife sharpness; collected bright feathers for their head-gear; painted pottery; wove blankets; manufactured face and body paint from blood root. They made mats of strung buckeyes; groomed their war ponies religiously; fed their dogs with the watchfulness and eagerness with which they fed their children; checked on their drying skins; fished, cured deermeat venison, collected shells for adornment, created colorful jewelry from silver and semi-precious stones and oiled their bodies with the fruit of the tung trees in preparation for the rituals in the burying grounds of their dead.

They were tactful—Vik grew to learn—ambitious, grave, humble on occasion if it were warranted, were clean of body (though he had not considered so at first) even going swimming in the river when it was edged with ice, and adhered, with strict obedience, to the laws of their tribe. Unlike the white man, they did not steal from one another (though they stole with relish from the paleface) did not commit adultery, rape, nor incest, and did not kill, except in lust for domination of the tribe; a lust strong in the heart of every brave who longed to become chief of the Hiwannee and the Kewanee. This ambition burned like a votive flame, endless, ceaseless; and made rivalry among the male population, especially the eager, young, beautiful braves. Hardly a day passed that some ambitious

and foolish boy did not challenge Neshoba for his rank as chief, or for the privilege of lying with Vik. All of them lusted for his young, smooth, white body, and Neshoba had to stand guard over him like a stallion tending its mare, swearing, making threats, matching skill in the chunky games or with stick ball; outdoing them in wrestling contests, fist fights, knife throwing, bareback riding, and endurance competitions.

The squaws in camp completely ignored the males' preoccupation with other males, especially their sexual interest in other males, as though it was a thing so natural they were not concerned (which it was) and it was a common sight to see two young braves pairing off after the community fires sifted to embers, or two on one horse riding off to some secret glade for a sexual tryst.

This same male preoccupation elevated Vik's rank, especially among the males, and nothing could have prevented his being flattered. For the males were all extremely well proportioned in bone and muscle; were golden smooth of complexion, boasted shiny manes of jet black hair, and wore hardly enough to hide their nakedness. Many times, during wrestling games, swimming, at work or play, carelessly threshing legs revealed male organs and pubic hair, constantly proving the Choctaw was burdened with no urge to modesty. Though the females were overly-careful to hide their forms beneath layers of doe-skins, the young males could not have cared less. Nudity to them was the mark of their masculine pride, and they exhibited this manly pride in hundreds of little maneuvers as a ruse

and to shame other less fortunate males. Sometimes they danced entirely naked, their lithe forms gyrating to the rhythm of drum and seeded gourd, huge brilliant stewartia blossoms in their long flowing manes, and one of their favorite pastimes was to exhibit and compare erections.

In an encampment teeming with sex, where morals were unknown, Vik came, in time, to witness some strange sights. Some amusing to him, others a little frightening.

But as true winter blew in with killing frosts, turning to scarlet the hills with brilliantly lit foliage of the blueberry bush, the leaves red from the first killing frost, the encampment automatically moved indoors, practicing its skills by the warmth of tepee fires, drinking hot gourd bowls of sassafras, sleeping, dreaming of spring to come.

Neshoba's affection for Vik during that awesome winter was a malady continuous. Nightly he topped Vik's young body with animal groans and sighing moans, pulling the white to him after climax, basking in the glory of Vik's willing, many times too-willing body. Sometimes, when the snow drove so fiercely outside Neshoba dared not venture, except for the feeding and watering of his white stallion "Dove," he lay with Vik's body through the dark hours, pinned to Vik's body by his turgid horn, carrying out his sexual rhythm until the first pink streaks of dawn seeped into the tent from the smoke vent in the roof. At times he did not take him at all, working for hours on a lance, satchels embroidered in

bright beads and berries, furbishing the white man's saddle with the silver trappings which he never used, making Vik small, useless gifts, preparing meals. Then, as if some great ecstasy had come over him, he would, at times, drop what he was doing, untie his loincloth, and leap on Vik as a cur will during the mating season. At times, swept up with love and ardor, he would unfold the crimson, sable-trimmed robe of Henry and, laying Vik's naked body within, wrap him carefully, holding him in his huge bronze arms, just sitting looking at him, admiring him, warmly making light love to him.

During this interval of sex and love-making, this travail of manly passion and primitive rapture, Vik learned much about this savage lover who took him first like a bound slave, then had beguiled him with something of so immense and so dark a rapture that Vik fully capitulated, moulding his body, his being, his very soul to fit this savage's wishes. As a squaw will learn both her man's strengths and weaknesses, and remain silent and obedient to both, so did Vik accept Neshoba: the things he craved, the things he would and must and did have. He was as helpless as a lamb in the dark lair of a lion when he was in the presence of this primeval god, as powerless to lift a finger as a wren to peck at a hawk, and in this undeclared weakness, this weakness he had never planned, dreamed, he became the implement of Neshoba's joy. He melted under his persistent power, his loving ferocity, the experience of his swift and savage strength, when even Neshoba's most tender reac-

tion was coarse, crude, hard; when, even in his most estatic love-making he threatened him with his unbridled lust—a lust that Vik imagined could turn from the warmth of love into the most lethal of hatreds, of killing rages and wrath, if a savage opponent or rival interfered. As in the attempt to take meat from a lion, Neshoba would have ripped to ribbons anyone who might try to steal Vik from him. And Vik, sensing this, remained a little afraid of him from the first.

But, as winter kept them in the smoke hazed tepee, Neshoba calmed out of him any terrors he might harbor, charmed him with his crude personality—a personality so forceful that his hard, primitive entity pulled at Vik's, stealing his strength through his will, his carnal purpose.

That he was loyal was unmistakable. The most loyal and dedicated of lovers. And he demonstrated that loyalty with his rich outpourings of passionate ardor; by his merest touch, a silver glance, a hum while he worked, the security of his great, dominant presence, the safety from all the brutalities of the world Vik feared, sensed, felt, even when Neshoba sat beside him, lay down beside him naked at night, took him both calmly and fiercely, loved him and caressed him. Neshoba told him ancient legends, sang to him in the Choctaw tongue, learned to kiss him, in time (Indians do not kiss), probing the darkest recesses of his soul with his searching tongue, bending, sliding his tongue to his organ, gripping it with tongue and teeth, then back again to his lips, holding his chin firm with hard, blood-stained hands fresh from a winters snare,

covering him with the dark curtains of his rancid mane.

Never had Vik known anyone so physically strong, so mentally dominant. A dark and mysterious phantom hovering over his world, anarchic, devouring, both with his body and his eyes, lapping with burning tongue, chafing with hairy, burning limbs, a dark and wondrous god in this pelt-covered fastness. And, strangely, Vik became as content as if he lived in the castle of Coca in Segovia, one of the most beautiful in the world.

He was being given the richness of passion and love. His small body was worshipped by a god whose body was far more ardent, more fearsomely beautiful than Vik's could ever be, loved by a man who was born to love women, impregnated with a flesh-horn made to procreate, to give to the world tiny beautiful images of himself.

All this richness was his—Vik Alta's—an exile from the cobbles of Katrineholm, Sweden, a blond and starry-eyed boy whose ambition, once, was to stand under the stage-light and listen to (to him) the angelic sounds of applause. Now, all he wanted, longed for, had, was the mysterious darkness of Neshoba's body, the essence of his sex, all of him, his bone and muscle, his mind, his heart, his thoughts. Everything else in the world to which he had aspired, everything toward which his ambitions had led him, were as dried leaves rotting under bare trees compared to his Neshoba, and the awe-inspiring, overwhelming power of his love.

Vik wanted, longed for nothing else. This had

become his world, his glory, his ambition, his life. Nothing else existed. Neither time nor substance—life nor death—yesterday nor tomorrow. Just this one dark moment in his life, this secret hide-away from civilized madness, this heaven fashioned from pelts of dead beasts, warmed by the fires of a miniature hell, fed by love, a dark, naked body grimed with pigfat and goose grease. This was a heaven where he could see and touch his god, feel him, render unto him his own body—not an invisible god he could not see nor touch nor name, a shadow on the wall compared to the god who lay down beside him at night, who cradled him with utmost protection, who sang him to sleep, and awoke him again with his turgid loins digging into the darkest recesses of his soul.

This was heaven. Far away, in the civilized world lay hell.

“Kiss me, Neshoba,” he cried out longingly in his half-sleep. “Hold me, never let me go—never!”

Once, in panic, he had become terrified at the thought of entering this anarchic, primeval world. Now he trembled in fear of leaving it, losing it.

“I will never let you wander again in the land of the white man,” Neshoba assured him, rolling over on his belly to penetrate Vik with all the glory rigidly vested in his productive horn. “I will follow you to the end of eternity. I will kill whoever tries to take you away from me. I will die fighting that you might live, torture my body with sores until I become a bleeding wound, until

I drown in my own blood. I will never leave you, Sky Eyes, nor will I let you leave me."

Vik lay and listened to this sad and haunting song, his small body crushed against the etherealized giant beside him, listened to the witch hazel flinging its dried seeds into the snow, and he thought with a sharp pain in his heart:

"If god is mightier than this, than mighty he must be indeed."

And he wondered, as Neshoba—like the seeds of the witch hazel—spurted into him, how could a thing so glorious as this, this love for Neshoba, be so despicable in the world of which he had been a part, while it remained a thing so natural to this wild being the world demeaned as a heathen . . . and his soul cried:

"Who is the less civilized?"

Chapter **Eight**

There came a great murmuring in the land, a stirring of life, like the child in its mother's womb as spring, in all her gorgeous profusion, hung out her festoons of beauty.

Redbuds splashed the tall tree limbs with lavender. Emerald leaves of the dogwood and catalpa lipped each other like the tongues of elves, with that of Ponderosa pine and larches. Indian pinks bordered the limestones, camellias lay burning carpets along the lower regions, pickerel weed made purple-headed reeds in the crystal shallows, pussy willow catkins waved furry plumes, and dog-toothed violets dared peek their thick-petaled blossoms up from the yellow moss and dead lueaves.

The Choctaws came out of soot-blackened Tepees, breathed the fresh spring air into their lungs and set about working the land for plant-

ing. Children romped and played, filling the air with wild shouts as they took up the game of stick ball, each player using two rackets and a rawhide ball. Dogs mated in the open, stallions sniffed the mares, bass and bluegill and pike gathered in the shallows, beneath the water lilies, and the limbs of the trees were swarming with noisy yellow-throats, orioles, doves, sparrows and wrens. Through the underbrush, wild turkey ventured, picking up choice worms and seeds, the whippoorwills sang their mating calls by night, and the raucous jays sunned their wings at the edge of streams, the painted bunting of white clouds made decorous notes in the limpid sky; while the ibis and heron and sandpipers stalked the moss laden trails like tiptoeing phantoms.

Vik and Neshoba, from their winter happiness, became as the others—drugged on the beauty of spring, the rustling of the tender leaves, the corsages of blossoms in the splotches of sunlight, the singing of the birds, the sighing of the pines in the fresh breeze.

In the fine warm weather, under the smiling sky, the activity of small life lending its energy to others, Neshoba took Vik on a woodland outing. They rode "Dove," Vik up front, Neshoba's bronze arms protectively around him, his naked thighs rubbing Vik's buttocks, skirting, as they went, the boundary of the Choctaw nation, passing through several villages who greeted them with humble esteem. They forded lakes and streams and ate Neshoba's kill when they became hungry. Each day was filled with new

glories, as Neshoba planned things for them to do, swim in a near by lake sunning their naked bodies on a protruding limestone, hunting, riding, sleeping in the shade of the pines, on the carpets of pine needles, flower hunting, petting a lame deer, hiking, racing, making love in the open, out under the clean, cloudless sky. Vik being taken in the Sosebee cave, laughed, sang, loved again.

It was heaven to Vik, a balmy heaven interlaced with blossom and perfume, of singing birds and falling water and Neshoba's hot lips and burning, gendering thighs. No thought of yesterday, no concern for tomorrow, for he realized that tomorrow would bring to Neshoba and him the identical happiness today had brought.

They lived by darkness and by light, by their thirsts and their hungers, by their sleeping and their waking, by their love and by their sex. One occurrence was timed by another, and watch and calendar were useless. The sun was Neshoba's clock, and Vik's gold pocket watch was as useless as a sundial in the rain. Its ticking only fascinated Neshoba and curiosity of the children. One day Vik gave it to Neshoba, who hung it about his neck, along with his other necklaces of glass and tooth and shell.

With the change in the seasons, the bright warm weather and the clear skies Neshoba decided to build another Tepee, in memory of his father, Escatawpa—build it for Vik, his new god.

The entire encampment, much to the disapproval of the young braves, who lusted for Vik, were called upon to help with the construction.

The timbers were hewn from cypress, only the best pelts were selected, and hundreds of tiny animals gave their lives to line the inner walls of Vik's love temple. The down of flocks of Canadian geese were used to line the enormous bed, the fluffy tails of a hundred squirrels were used to trim it, the plumage of a hundred bluejays to overlay the soft pillow on which Vik would rest his head. Turkey claws trimmed the entrance flap, the most beautiful stones and shell collected by the children paved the walk, and only the white pelts of virgin deer could be used to floor the interior. Vik utilized his own talents, drawing on the white man's world, when it came time to erect the hearth. He showed the young braves how to mix mud and moss for mortar, and the hearth was built up from the center, huge enough, like a well, so that he and Neshoba could sit on it while they warmed themselves by the flames. He showed them, too, how to form a huge cone from sycamore bark, which was hung directly above the round hearth to catch and steer the smoke to the vent and out. He schooled them in making an enormous chair from cowhorns, much in style of the Roman field chair, and how to make camel seats from split oak and leather. He showed them how to dye the leather with bloodroot, and many cushions were stitched of the ox-blood colored leather when they were made and scattered throughout the tepee. Enormous urns were made from clay, painted in Choctaw designs, and set about the floors. In these Vik planted marsh fern and thatch palm, adding something growing in the primitive decor. Racks

made of high polished cedar were made so that Neshoba's knives and whips and lances could be racked neatly. Pegs were carved for his war bonnets, and a rack made in saw-horse fashion for his saddle. The inner walls were decorated with the finest in war-shields and lances. One was brought from each village, bearing on it the tribe's insignia, bestowed upon Neshoba by the village leader, and each village contributed its finest blanket. Every virgin contributed a pair of beads, which cascaded from the roof to the floor in a colorful maze of glass and shell and berry, and the fairest virgin in all the tribes in the Hiwannee and Kewanee nations was escorted to pay the honor of laying the bluejay pillow on the marital bed, by Neshoba's singular request.

Neshoba intended to marry Vik, by Choctaw law, and he aimed, as chief, to have all the essential trimmings. The moneymoon lodge would be a thing of perfect creation, in keeping with his great love for the yellow-haired Viking; and appropriate to the smooth blond beauty of his male bride. Too, an old regret pained him. The more he knew Vik the more he considered the words of his father. Into his mind and heart was summoned the notion that he was mating with a god. Vik, to him now, had become completely Abba Inca, the celestial deity of his ancestry, the god of Montazuma and, as chief, he must love him, but with awe.

Vik was speechless over the proceedings. But he accepted this decision with silence. He knew now that Neshoba loved him above and beyond all things.

That evening before the wedding ceremony Neshoba gave him "Dove" as a wedding gift, his most prized and most valuable possession.

Vik was at the stream bathing in the shallow turn where the clear water bubbled about the shiny stones. Neshoba came down the flower sprinkled path leading the white stallion by a tether made from the white belly-hide of a young doe. A scarlet feather, to mark the end of his ownership, was thrust in the bridle, turned toward earth and not heaven.

"Dove is yours to keep always," Neshoba said to him, taking one of Vik's wet nipples between two fingers and pressing fondly. "He came to me from the wild herd of Natchez, on the banks of the Mississippi. Only to look at him burns my heart with love. But now I have you, Sky Eyes, and I need no other symbol of beauty."

A white dove flew between Vik and Neshoba.

It was a good sign, in Neshoba's eyes.

"It will be for both of us," Vik said, taking the reins. "Yours and mine, Neshoba. We will ride him together, as we did at the beginning of spring. Always together, the three of us, for I know you live with a pure heart, and love him dearly."

Neshoba blinked back a tear.

"No, Sky Eyes," he said, sadly, but with a noble heart. "It is forbidden for a brave to ride the pony of his squaw."

Vik felt annoyance. Could it be that Neshoba held him that much indeed as a woman? Then he asked him a question he had longed to ask him since the beginning of the building of the honey-

moon lodge.

"Now that you want me in marriage, Neshoba, will—will this ritual change anything between us?"

A trace of a smile rented Neshba's swarthy face.

"You are truly the god of Abba Inca," Neshoba answered, as the shrill call of a dove in a high green limb filled the air with silver. "But because I want your body, your love so much, I do not have the strength, the courage to resist you. In my want for you I am become a coward. In the white tepee you must be the same to me, as from that first night, the moon of our mating, but beyond the tepee in the golden light of the sun you must be only to me Abba Inca, the true god of Montazuma." He paused, ran his nimble fingers through the stallion's white mane. "Tonight, when the marriage ceremony is over, go directly to my tepee, wait. In the meantime I will prepare myself, and tonight you must suck at my loins, to drink my mortal self, so that I too will feel your godliness and become as a god myself."

And that night, when the moon hung high in the tops of the willows, and the ceremony was over and done, the monotonous drum beatings, the dancing, the smoking, the mournful rhythms, Vik guided "Dove" to the entrance to the Tepee, tied him to a cypress railing and entered. He stripped himself of the red robes of Henry, his wedding gown, and lay back on the cloud of white goose feathers, waited, anxiously, his naked body gleaming in the luminous glow

streaming in through the opened vent.

He did not shave long to wait. Soon Neshoba appeared, bearing a flaming pineknot torch. He thrust it into the coals at the hearth, so the white-feathered tepee sprang into spectacular detail in the brilliant saffron light.

As he approached the bed on which Vik lay, Neshoba unhitched his scarlet loincloth. His stalwart nakedness jumped at Vik. He had observed Neshoba's form hundreds of time during the long glorious winter, had marveled at his swarthy beauty each time he had gazed, but he had never seen him so radiant, so beaming with masculine beauty, so grave and so harmoniously sculpturesque.

He had freshly bathed, his long hair still damp, his muscles toned with the freshness of cleansing water and scented oils. Neshoba fairly gleamed in the flaring torchlight. He smelled of wetness and freshness, of the oils of the passion flower, of the crushed petals of jasmine. And as he came ever nearer, Vik caught, as if by some half-forgotten memory, the wild scents of trilliums, recalling the time Neshoba had made a garland for his hair out of these delicate petals of spring.

Neshoba thrust one leg over Vik, straddling him, both dark knees on the bluejay pillow, his crotch at Vik's trembling chin. His huge organ hung like a serpent from the moss laden depths of a tree, sliding down from the dark pubic nest, a gleaming tube of flesh, its great head lifting as if by summons, a silent call for some tremendous deed, alerting its heavily veined contours to rise

to the darkness of some premediated evil, a sulking, blind being of immense rapture, feeling out its victim, glowing with an inner life of its own, pulsing from a focus of mind and thought, upon only the doing.

Its dark body, coiled with cords and veins, tightening of its own flesh as it swelled within, turgid with passion, rode above Vik's curious eyes like a beautiful monster, a monster without sense of anything but touch, the opening in the tip of its head spreading and closing, a mouth without teeth, without tongue, red as the mouth of a fox. At the sight of its enormity, of the two gourds riding in their sling, Vik reached up and drew it into his mouth. He saw Neshoba's body stiffen, noticed the belly muscles bulge in hard contours, above the black patch of hair from which all this ecstasy came.

As if he was dying from hunger Vik mouthed it unceasingly, rolling his tongue over the enormous head, thought how much it resembled the reeds of the pickerel, dark and stiff and crowned with a jubilant head of purple, bone hard yet spongy soft, warm to his hunger, shaping itself to the cave of his mouth, filling him, enticing him to suck with greater abandon. He was wrapped in the full-fledged glory of masculinity, engulfing its cingulum of creation, devouring it with his eyes, his lips, his every emotion. He was taking now, rather than giving, sucking at the great phallic spring of life, his victim the most elemental of humans, a male from the very dark heart of earth, a savage throw back to the glories of Abba Inca, the first and only god of the new

continent. He had gone into the past to find his token of copulation, to rendezvous with a being so primeval, so primitive—so savage in origin and sense, that he might as well be copulating with a cave man.

And how glorious this animality of the human world, a male so purely physical that his every move, his every gesture cried the word sex. Neshoba *was* sex personified. He was the essence of sperm, of black groin hair, of swinging seeds, of a serpent for an organ, a gleaming hair fringed serpent that choked him until saliva ran in shimmering streams down his chin, into the hollow of his neck. So much male it drowned his eyes with burning tears and bent his small body in unison with every thing that was savage, ferocious. As the hot sperm gorged the channel of the sobbing Neshoba's pulsating organ and flooded into him, Vik spermed also, the seed of life spilling in the hard sterility of human striving.

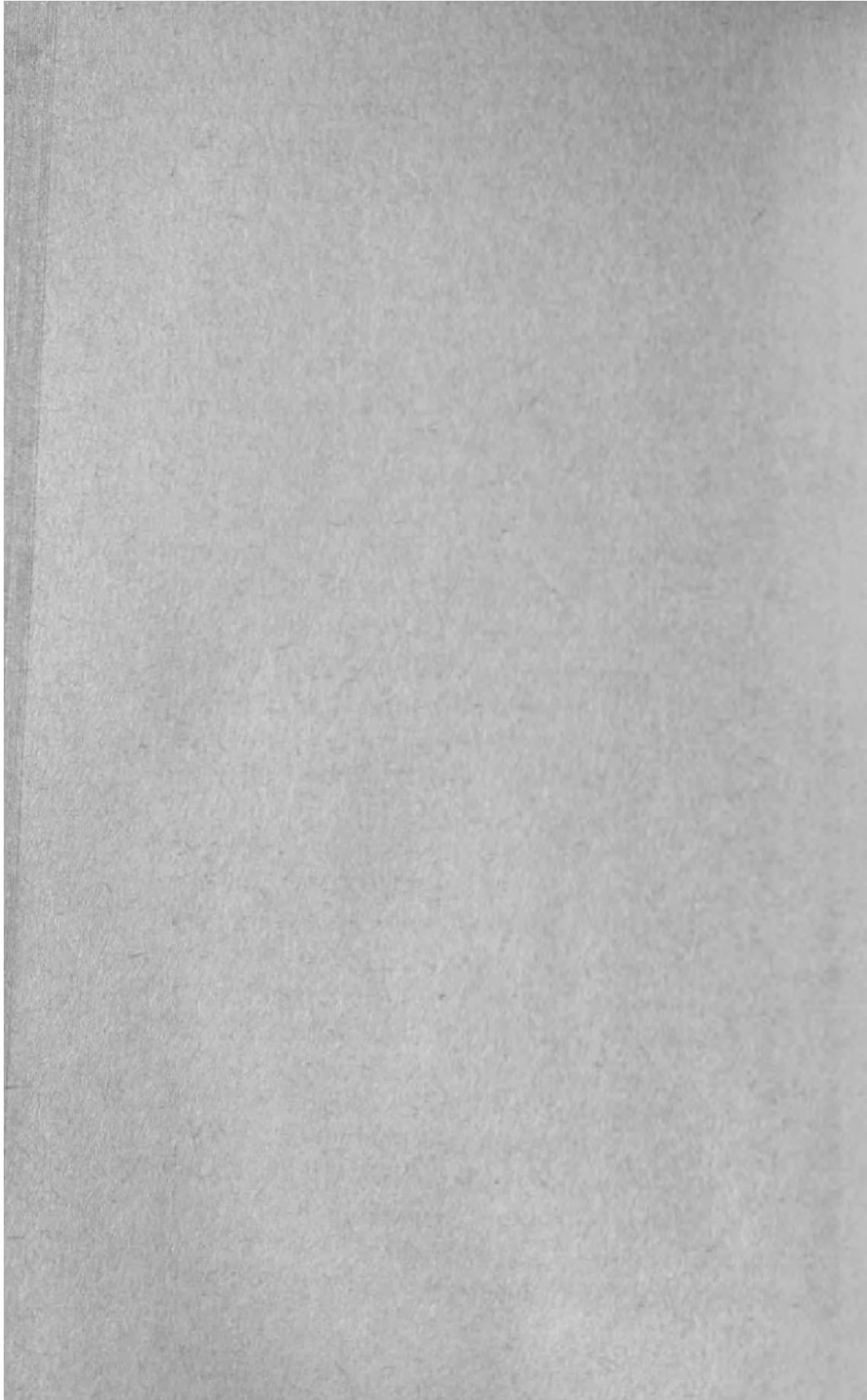
Now Vik had tasted of the most beautiful savage on earth, had smacked his lips on the tasting, had fed on the froth of semen, had drunk his fill, had gloried in the spawn-syrup of Neshoba's love.

And because of the act he was the less mortal for the tasting and Neshoba more god-like. Now they were one, the god—the man.

Dully he considered his change, as the thighs of Neshoba rested on his limp shoulders. This was his honeymoon, married by Indian law to a savage, and he loved it, was a part of it, a major part, in fact he was it, body and soul. Neshoba, in his swarthy, carnal desperation, in his dark

ferocity, had tapped Vik's mind, his heart, more than Vik had tapped Neshoba's body.

Neshoba had changed him to the Indian way, and he found irresistible ecstasy in the change.



Chapter

Nine

One balmy afternoon a scout from one of the smaller villages reported to Neshoba that a white man's wagon train was making its way up the Natchez trace, so Neshoba gathered a small war party and rode off to intercept it.

He left Vik in the honeymoon lodge, guarded by the young virgin girl who had lain the bluejay pillow on the marriage bed. They called her Winona, and she was one of the fairest girls Vik had ever seen. None of the classic creoles from New Orleans could hold a candle to her for beauty and grace, nor any of the sublime, statue-like actresses who had trod the stage with him. She was like a young doe, her black eyes bright, beckoning; her plaited hair in two neat braids down each side of her heart-shaped face.

No Indian brave of the Choctaw clan would do an unheard of thing, beat a squaw: he may work

her in the fields, expose her to all kinds of carnal pleasures, impose upon her every known hardship in this primitive existence, but he would never strike her. Should he do so, thenceforth he would be called a squaw for fighting with a woman; suffer total disgrace. So when Neshoba left a female to guard his love tent he felt secure in his decision. And he was doubly certain of Vik.

But Vik, young, easily impressed, born of a long line of Vikings who took their pleasure with women, not men, bowed to the inevitable. Winona smiled at him when he thrust his head out of the tent entrance, and that was enough for a youth with the fire of the Vikings running through his blood. He invited her into the tent and began to court her, harmless at first, drawing on his memory of the way he had teased and flirted with the gay courtesans from the Square in the French Quarter. But, Indian men do not pay court to Indian maids: they merely take them. So his advances naturally were interpreted as a prelude to carnal debauchery. She slipped out of her doe-skin jerkin and lay on the white goose-feather bed for him to follow suit. He did. Before he realized what he was doing, he had taken off his clothes and was lying beside her. He began to fondle her naked breasts, kissed the huge nipples, which resembled twin black-eyed susans. The more he kissed the more she squirmed against him. He got an erection, got quickly upon his knees, spread her soft thighs and penetrated her womb. The moment it entered, like a eel in a cave of mud, she locked her

legs around his buttocks, her arms around his neck, tightly, but lovingly, and they became a flurry of emotion there on Vik's marital bed, sinking into the white downy softenss, as he rose and fell against her smooth groin, jabbing without mercy, as her virgin womb opened its lips for him, like the sweet innocence of a babe crying for its mother's nipple.

In the doing he did not think of betraying Neshoba. It is not the nature of the male. In sex he thinks only of sex. Nor did he consider the consequences should Neshoba find out. Neither is forethought a male capability during sex, not that he did not love Neshoba with all the love he possessed, but man is not monogamous. He will stray if sex is the dominant factor. That Vik should share sex with this young, doe-eyed creature was only natural. She was there, in his tent, and he was ready. Too, in some deep recess of his conscience, he was only bowing to his nature, throwing a morsel to his enormous sexual appetite.

When he was through with her he compared her sexual potentials with Neshoba's and found them in the order of the mouse to the lion. She was no more than a shadow on the wall compared to Neshoba's fierce, voracious flame, a dull faded vervain to his scarlet and wild bergamot that grows in the black bear's cave. But in all her shy innocence, her eagerness to comply with his momentary needs, she remained something to him electric and beautiful and he had no way of knowing what ills would befall her because of his wanton act.

That evening, when Neshoba arrived, his shoulder pierced by a rifle ball fired delivered by a cavalryman riding trail with the wagon train, he learned with awe and dread his mistake.

One of the young braves, jealous of the virgin Winona, told of her presence in the honeymoon lodge. Neshoba killed him on the spot. Then, weary, sodden with fatigue and loss of blood, he stalked into the tepee.

“How could you do this?” he cried in a welter of tears, his dark moody eyes burning into Vik’s, as he sank down on the white bed. “How could you be with a woman—a squaw—when you are mine to the bone?”

Vik went white.

“Kill me too,” Vik muttered, realizing fully what he had done in an unthinking moment of folly. And that was what it was, sheer folly; an act to fill a void of boredom. But how could he explain this to Neshoba? How could he explain this to the man who thought he owned Vik body and soul?

“No! No!” Neshoba growled, shaking his sweaty head until his black mane went up in sails. “Death is the black door. There is no pain, no longing, no love in death. Death is too quick for the likes of you, Sky Eyes! Too easy a punishment. Too quick! How can I make you suffer—you—who I love more than I loved my mother and my god? How can I make you feel what I am feeling now, burning inside because your hands have touched a woman, because your lips have touched a woman, because your loins have touched a woman?”

He rose from the bed, flung his arms into the air, lifted his head with a mournful cry: "By all the gods! How can I burn out your heart, wound your spirit—as mine is wounded! Spare me this pain...oh, Abba Inca...spare me this pain!"

"I love you, Neshoba, truly," Vik said with a trembling voice. And he lay a hand on Neshoba's shoulder, touched the bullet wound, seeing the black powder stain around the oozing wound.

"Love!" Neshoba cried, flinging his hand away. "Do you, Sky Eyes...do you know of love?" He sank down on the bed again in a storm of emotion, his shoulders shaking with sobs, his black hair in sooty, blood-stained tangles. "Do you know, Sky Eyes, what it is for a man of the forests like me, an animal, to love someone like you? Do you know what it is to lie at night, with you in my arms, praying to the gods to keep you safe, for me? Do you know how I have crept out at night, while you were asleep, to walk where the doe goes, praying that I may learn of your beauty, the way your beauty clutches itself on my heart, robbing me of peace? Do you know that each time my horn gores you I know the end of passion will soon come and that I will have to wait and long and crave you over and over again? Did you know that everytime a bird sings, or a owl hoots, or a wolf bays or my stallion neighs that my love for you goes deeper and deeper into my soul? No, Sky Eyes, you do not know these things. You cannot know the love of an animal. You cannot know the love of an Indian for a white man, one as beautiful as yourself, or the hatred, for love and hate are

horns on the same goat. Why—Sky Eyes—why, I beg you, tell . . . why did you go to another—a woman?”

“I am a fool,” Vik cried to him, in massive agitation. “A stupid blind fool. Oh, Neshoba, if only I had known, if only I had really and truly known you felt like this, that your heart was so brave, so beautiful, so good, so noble.”

Vik sank beside him, took hold of his bleeding arm, his breath coming hot, pumping like a thing mad in his lungs.

“You did not know,” Neshoba moaned, still sobbing brokenly. “Did not my loins tell you, did not my lips speak of it, did not my horn deliver it with far more meaning than my words? The voice is nothing. The heart and body are everything. When I gore you, even once, I am giving to you everything that is my love, like I give into death when I cast my lance, string a bow. My heart aims straight, for my love for you is true, and truth finds its target. One kiss of my burning lips on yours and you must know, should have known, for my mouth devours our love, as the fires devours the forests, as the serpent devours its own tail, swallowing itself as I swallow our love. My soul, my love for you, Sky Eyes, is in the tip of my tongue and the tip of my horn, and they come to meet in the middle of your beautiful body. I gave you all of myself. What more can I give?”

“Oh . . . nothing! Nothing more,” Vik said, the hot tears streaming down his face, dripped off the end of his chin. “Neshoba, give me another chance, let me prove to you how much I

care, how much I love you. Let me tend your wound, let my tongue cleanse it, wash away all your pain, let me show you with my own body that Winona means no more to me than a feather means to an eagle."

Neshoba grabbed his hand, held it firmly against his heart.

"Love me, Sky Eyes. Lick away this fire that burns wild in my heart, quench it with your tongue, put it out, or this pain will devour me. Oh, Sky Eyes, lift this hurt from me. Cut it out of my heart. Make me well again. Make my love for you pure and white again, like the call of the rock dove out of the wilderness. Do not hurt me more. Do not give yourself to any woman, nor man, but keep yourself for me. I deserve you, Sky Eyes, for I—I love you more."

"I know that now," Vik said, as he rose and began to strip Neshoba of his warring clothes. "No one, ever, man or woman, shall have me but you"

With Neshoba naked down to his riding boots, boots stolen from the white man, Vik began to wash his shoulder wound with his tongue, cleansing away the powder stain and dried blood, the grime of the trails, the sweat from his glands. And as he cleaned, the act merged into his love of the chief, devouring that fierce and wanton love, with searching eyes and lips; his probing tongue washing away Neshoba's grief, the wrong he had committed against him, praying as he cleansed for things to be right with them in the future, that Neshoba would forgive him for his idiot's folly. And when he was through, Nesho-

ba's body, his loins, his arms, his chest gleaming like marble in the half-light, he took a gourd of ginseng oil and anointed him from head to toe, slipping off his boots, which he wore so proudly, and kissing his toes and ankles. Then he combed back his long tasseled hair and tied it with a thong of rawhide at the nape of his neck. In this ministering of love, Neshoba fell asleep, and Vik, standing back, viewed him, half submerged in the mountain of white furs trimmed with the tails of squirrels. And in his shame for what he had done, his new martyrdom vaguely in his mind and feebly evident in his conscience, he saw here a new god lying in veneration—a god surely in his own right, pure as sunlight, wholesome as maize, as crystal as water. Above all else pure in heart.

Vik lay down beside him, put his arms around him, and kissed him on the lips, but the next morning when he rose, he rose to a new side of Neshoba—vengeance. And he remembered what Neshoba had said the night before, that love and hate were horns on the same goat.

At high noon Neshoba came to the tepee and bade Vik follow him. He led the way to a hidden valley which lay between two well worn trails and was rarely, if ever, entered. There, tied by her shoulders hung Winona, the wet rawhide thongs going up into the multi-colored leaves of a slick-barked sycamore. She was completely naked and yet alive, though her eyes were rolled back to the top of her eyes, her breath but low, hissing intonations, her complexion a sickly green. Her breasts had been sliced clean from her

body, and long streams of blood ran from them, down her legs, and dripped on the leaves until they were drenched a livid red. A rattlesnake, huge of proportion, and still alive, had been thrust up her womb, head first, and was tied about her groin by strips of hide. It hung, wreathing, giving her the appearance, at first glance, of being male rather than female. She was a hideous sight, and Vik winced when he saw her, and knew that the snake was slicing out her womb, infiltrating her entire body with venom so lethal she was already a pale green.

"You have done this, Neshoba," Vik said faintly gritting his teeth against the nausea of revulsion that set his nerves on edge." Why? Why?"

"My love for you," he answered, not glancing once at him.

"But that poor girl," Vik cried." Why punish her? I am the one at fault—not her.

"I did it to punish you, not her," Neshoba responded sadly but without seeming concern for Winona." And I will do this to every woman who ever touches your body. If it be a man, then the punishment will be worse."

Vik knew instinctively that Neshoba would do whatever he said he would do. And though he was deeply flattered that this handsome savage loved him so, he felt sick and stained by the depth, the awesome quality of that love. And he turned to go.

"One thing more," Neshoba said, halting him. Vik paused, and Neshoba came up to where he stood. Their eyes met, and there were strange,

fleeting lights in them, and with those lights pain and sorrow and something vaguely akin to heartbreak. Vik looked up at the Indian as if really seeing him for the first time, and saw then how pale he looked, how drawn his lips, how furrowed his brow. Something was troubling him, not just the folly of yesterday, the torture of this girl, but something deep, and vital. Something tragic and profound.

"Do you truly love me, Sky Eyes?" he asked, his black eyes hot and shining in the dense afternoon light." As a woman would love a man?"

Vik did not have to hesitate.

"Yes, Neshoba, I love you .. truly. When I first was brought here I loathed you and all your kind, because I was frightened of you I suppose, what you would do to me, since Rafe and the stage driver. But I have grown to love you, Neshoba, truly love you. You have become the most wondrous person in my life. Just don't change anything. If you do—if you do, Neshoba, it will break my heart."

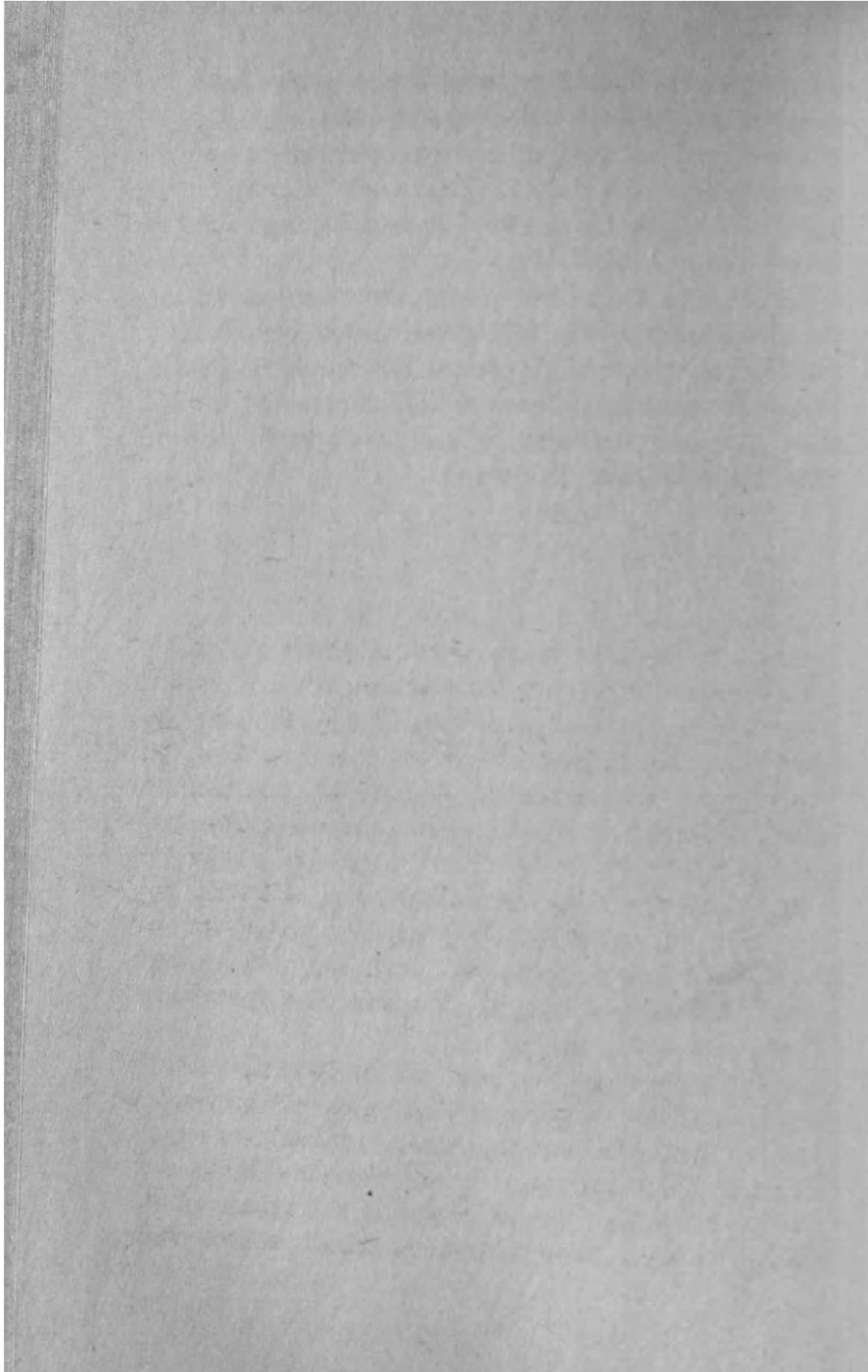
Neshoba's expression looked even more grim.

"I love you too, Sky Eyes, but all that is spoiled for me now," he said in a whisper, bowing his dark head. "Spoiled like the ripe melons left in the fields to rot. I am poisoned on your love. I am sick inside. All the days in my life I will haunt these woods robbed of peace." He raised his eyes, looked squarely into Vik's." I love you, but I will not touch you again ... ever!"

Wearily, gutted with inexplicable heartbreak, Vik climbed out of the dismal valley where Win-

ona drew her last breath; where his noble love stood like a vengeful wraith of the stone age, an entity without identity, going thence to the honeymoon lodge, the home that was no longer home, if Neshoba his brave, his knight, was not there to share it with him.

But far into the night, as he lay sleepless on the soft feathery bed, when the moon was full and turning to luminous gauze the lonely, desolate world outside, a shadow fell across the entrance. It was Neshoba, come to lie with the vessel of love he had forsworn.



Chapter Ten

But, though Neshoba slept in the tepee that night, he did not claim his portion, nor any other night in the immediate future. Moodily, in an awesome silence, he slumped on a mountain of pillows on the opposite side of the tent. But during the night Vik could hear him tossing and turning, and many times at dawn he would be gone, out hunting or riding or just walking through the woods, occupying his thoughts on other things, though Vik with a sick heart mourned their love, their worship of each other's bodies.

Vik, lonely now, lost, empty for Neshoba's love, their long conversations, their pleasant times together, moped about the camp, hoping that something would happen to jolt Neshoba into once more speaking his love; something that would forge a compromise, that they might resume their

life where they had left off on the dreadful day Winona was murdered.

Sometimes, during meals, going to and from the tent their hands would touch, their shoulders would brush, and something maddening and defying would run through Vik's every vein, shuddering his heart. When such things happened, he longed desperately to fall into his arms, lean his head against the broad shoulders, cry out his heartbreak, but the chance never seemed to present itself so that he could sit with Neshoba and speak his love, tell him how he longed to be swept up in his strong, bronze arms, to feel his hot lips on his, to feel all of him in the love bed at night. But Neshoba's grave silence, his haunted eyes, his stealthy manner froze Vik's heart. This man was not going to speak, to laugh, to love . . . again.

At first, Vik thought that his oath had been no more than words out of jealousy. Oaths were made to be broken, the same as laws. But as the dull days wore on, abrading his nerves, robbing him of heart, Vik grew to accept the idea that Neshoba had meant what he had said. Love him or not, Neshoba had no intentions of making love to him—or involving his body in sex.

When Vik cried out of his tortured system all he could cry, he tried to brace up, make the best of a gruesome situation. At first he attempted striking up friendships with the other young men-braves of his age, but the killing looks Neshoba gave him during such casual encounters, advised him chillingly to leave well enough alone. So he began to riding "Dove" along the outskirts

of the encampment. He did not bother to ask Neshoba, for he felt strongly that Neshoba knew he would not attempt escape, that he sensed the magnetic hold he had on his Sky Eyes, and Vik set a casual air upon his outings. One day, as he rode out of camp he happened to notice Neshoba talking to a young brave on a spotted pony, and he knew that he was being followed, that Neshoba was keeping a touch on his movements, his counterfeit freedom. This spurred Vik to accept the possibility that Neshoba still did care, enough anyway not to want to lose him entirely. This eased his own throbbing heart, but only little. He was still sick in mind and body, and dreaded each night in the tepee as much as he yearned for it, for he knew painfully that Neshoba would be there-dominating his lonely life with his dark, grave beauty, a beauty now denied, and nothing could be more maddening, Vik considered, than having to live with someone you loved day by day and yet not be able to touch.

"Neshoba, take me, take me, please," he said one night after a lonely day reading his boring books and plays, with Neshoba absent for two days and nights on a raiding party, and so rapt with joy on his return he could no longer be silent.

"I will keep my word," was Neshoba's answer, and answer that came across the tent to him in a gutteral whisper, and it tore into his heart. He lay and cried the balance of the night. And when he arose the next morning Neshoba was gone and, flinging himself on the feathery bed, the same bed where they had made love so often, he

sobbed anew. And he promised himself tiredly that he would never ask him to touch him again.

Exiled now in his heart, torn by loss of love and loss of hope, Vik began to stay away from camp as much as possible. Taking one of his books-a thing dulled and jaded for him now compared to that glorious life with Neshoba, when they had loved, wallowed in their lust, he would ride down to the river and sit in the warm sunshine on an outcrop of stone and read. It was on one of these days that he sat, swinging his bare feet in sparkling water, musing at a mocking bird's song in the top of a tall pine, that he was startled out of his senses. He had taken to thinking about the outside world more and more, now that he had lost Neshoba and the wild fire they shared together. Seated in the dappled shade, he would take out the memories from his mind and thumb through them one at a time, like leafing through a cherished album; and some awareness of that society he had left behind began to slip back into his consciousness. At times, especially in Neshoba's absence (and he was absent often these days), Vik longed for the old life more than he liked to admit. He missed the theatre, the dressing, the making up, the footlights, the wild parties, the gaiety, the laughter. And he wondered forlornly sometimes what had possessed him to accept this primitive life with Neshoba. But one in the tepee at night and he beheld with hungry eyes Neshoba's naked body sprawled aloofly on the soft leather pillows, he knew why he had remained, why he would never possess the courage to put "Dove"

to a fast gallop and rid himself of the Choctaw nation, of Neshoba, and these people he once considered to base, so utterly savage. As long as there was an ounce of hope left in his heart he could not leave Neshoba behind. He had to stay. Every fiber in his heart dictated that he stay.

So, as he sat that lonely, dreary day on the protuding stone, a book in his lap, his mind lost, torn between the two worlds in which he had lived and loved, his white stallion suddenly bolted. With the bridle at trail, he bounded through the woods toward camp, his hoof beats on the soft mold like the rapid pounding in Vik's heart. Suddenly he stood, dropping his book in the river. It made a noisy splash as it struck the green waters and as Vik bent to retrieve it, a man came out of the woods and stood in the clearing.

It was Rafe!

"God! I thought you were dead!" Vik cried, staring at Rafe as he forded the river and came upon the rock, convinced he was seeing a ghost.

"Ah thought so too, once," Rafe said, with a sudden grin. He took hold of Vik, embraced him warmly. They stood then for a tense moment, staring at each other, believing yet not believing.

"Them blasted heathens left me for dead," Rafe said, taking off his hat and showing Vik the scar left by the tomahawk." I lay there all night, then next morning staggered back to Fort Adams. What about you?"

Vik told him, in broad strokes at first, then in minute detail, leaving out nothing except his relation with Neshoba.

"Them red bastards didn't—er—mistreat you, Vik boy?"

Vik shook his head.

"They have been good to me, Rafe."

Rafe gave him a skeptical look, then eyed him from head to foot.

"Why the hell you dressed like that: like an Indian?"

At that Vik realized how repugnant he must look to a white man, to Rafe; how strange—naked except for a loincloth and the beads Neshoba had fashioned for him from shells and teeth, and the white goose feather thrust in his long blond hair.

"I . . . I have become one of them," he broke off sadly, thinking of him and Neshoba together, their primitive love, their happiness.

"The hell you have, boy!" Rafe stormed, his black eyes suddenly glinted maliciously." You're white, and you'll always be white. You're no heathen, boy, never will be. You're like me . . . say you're like me."

Their eyes met. Vik's flinched.

"Things have changed, Rafe, since last we were together. I just don't know. I don't know."

Rafe frowned. His lips twisted down in a sardonic arc. His eyes suddenly lost their merry sparkle.

"Vik! Ah been through hell trying to get here to fetch you back home, holy hell! Ah want you, boy, with me. Ah want you, always. You understand that?"

"I understand," Vik answered, nodding his head." And I appreciate you thinking of me to

want to save me from the—from them . . ." His voice dragged as he thought of Neshoba. He couldn't say heathen, nor Injun nor savage, nor any of the opprobrious names applied to the Choctaw people. He had stated the truth. They had been good to him, and he could no longer condemn them, as did other white men.

"Ah've come to take you back, Vik," Rafe said, his voice trembling now, almost a stutter. "Maybe they have been good to you. Oh Ah'll be better to you, boy, better'n anybody. Like Ah said, Ah want you for myself. Ah need you, Vik, honest!"

Vik looked up into the reckless black eyes and knew he was speaking the truth. And the sound of his voice, so deep, so vibrant, so cajoling—his tumbled black hair, his dancing eyes all but enticed Vik back into the white man's world, that other world Neshoba had taught him to hate.

"Do you really care so much, Rafe?" he asked, merely playing with words.

"You know damn well Ah do," Rafe answered, his eyes more serious now, more demanding, even threatening. "Ah like to went out of my mind that morning when Ah woke up on the Natchez Trace and found you gone, the stage driver with a tomahawk in his skull. Ah was more hurt by that than Ah was by the wound in my head; heart-hurt over knowing you had been taken by them red sons-of-bitches."

Vik asked, with solemnity in his voice." How did you know that I was alive, that I was here?"

"There was a raid on a wagon train not long

ago. The leader wore your gold watch around his neck. It was still shiny bright, bright as a new penny, and Ah guessed right off that he had it but recently, for no Indian would have kept it in mint condition. And Ah figured you have it to him, so as to signal folks outside that you were in there with them, still alive. So Ah came to get you, to take you back with me."

Vik dropped his eyes. He knew the leader was Neshoba, and his face flushed crimson when he thought how Neshoba had come by his gold watch . . . the watch his mother had given him.

He thought for a moment, listening to the water running in a secretive whisper over the smooth stones, the wind brushing through the heavy-limbed trees, the blue-jays having a love battle in a sweetgum tree, and he pondered whether to tell him the truth and get it over with or to think of some plausible excuse, something that would justify his motives. Finally, he whispered, swallowing hard:

"Well, you have made a trip for nothing. For I'm not going."

"What!" Rafe shouted, unwary now. He had no knowledge of lurking Indians set on Vik's trail by Neshoba to spy on him. "Have them Indians raddled your brain or something?"

"I . . . I like it here," Vik stammered, battling his conscience for proper words. "All my life I suppose, I have looked for this kind of peace, this primeval paradise, and never found it till now. I think all men look for it, some time or another during their lives. The simple things, Rafe, the soil, the dark heart of the earth, the

way these gentle people live in truth, honesty, nobility—their kind of love.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Rafe said, bowing his head.” Ah can’t stand for you to say such things, with no love in your voice for me. When you say such things you seem so far away, so distant, like Ah can’t ever reach you, and Ah been trying to reach out for you, so long. Ah can’t stand it another minute, Vik, if Ah know Ah can’t have you again.”

“So much has happened, Rafe, so hellish much, things you may understand. I care. I care a lot, but things happen you can’t explain, people ... you don’t always love the same person, especially when ... when you’re not with them.”

“Ah love you ... and Ah ain’t been with you Not seeing you made no difference how Ah felt. If Ah was away from you a hundred years Ah’d still care. Ah’ll always care ... don’t you know that?”

Vik nodded dismally, and thought of Neshoba with a wild pain in his heart. If only he had of known for sure whether Rafe had actually died that day during the stage holdup; if only he had not gone on living, loving Neshoba, believing Rafe would never come to save him, that he would never see him again ... alive, then—then, he might have felt different, might truly have been glad to see Rafe now, alive, wanting him, loving him; eager to take him out of all this savage half-world; from Neshoba, who claimed his heart, his mind, his soul. But now it was too late.

“Rafe,” he whispered, looking up at him, his

heart in his eyes. "You won't want me always. Someday you'll find a woman, a good woman that you will love, who will love you, bear your children. I could never be what you want, not really. Maybe you think so now, but you will change, in time. We all change."

"Not me," he whispered. "Ah won't ever change my mind about you, Vik boy, never." He lifted Vik's chin with one huge dark hand and their eyes met, strange fleeting lights in them, and if Vik had not loved Neshoba so overwhelmingly, so thoroughly, he would have considered himself the luckiest of men. But, compared to Neshoba, what was Rafe? What was any man.

"Kiss me," Rafe cried, his wanton lips just below Vik's. "Kiss me once, and you'll leave this place with me, leave these red heathens and their murderous rages and their stealing the white man blind."

Suddenly, an old haunt invaded Vik's tortured heart, sending him back to that wondrous night at Fort Adams when he had lain in the bed with Rafe. And now after he had thought him dead, after he had given up completely, he had come back, as handsome as ever, as gallant, as reckless and provocative. He was back, so warm so near, and wanting him, wanting to free him from the curse of his Choctaw captivity. And Neshoba seemed so far away now, so dim in his mind, as if he had never existed at all, really; a savage who had loved him fiercely, wildly, but who now refused to touch him at all, to kiss him, to lie with him, to say the simple but necessary words to him, the words all people yearn to hear from

their lovers.

I may never have Neshoba again, he thought dismally to himself, remembering, as if from some crazy nightmare, the tragic, forlorn day Neshoba had made the oath in front of him and the dying Winona—swearing never to touch him again.

Sadly, as if the sun had faded behind the clouds, leaving him standing in shadowed chill, he knew that Neshoba never would.

In his heartbreak, his despair, he looked up at Rafe once more, saw his burning eyes on him, his red lips, felt Rafe's warm body pressing into his, felt Rafe's arms go suddenly around his waist, and all love for Neshoba, all the sorrowful bonds fell loose.

Their lips met, burned into each other's, melted like hot wax.

"Ah'm going to take you with me," Rafe murmured, sliding his lips over Vik's again and again." You're mine. You'll always be mine."

Vik nodded, they tore themselves apart, and they forded the stream.

But once on the opposite side, Rafe pointed to the hill which towered like a wall up the valley's edge. There, black on scarlet, sat an Indian on an ebony pony. One of Neshoba's watchdogs!

"Lets hurry," Rafe cried, as they scampered through the underbrush.

Without horses to aid their flight, they both ran as if their souls were in their feet, ran with bursting hearts. The wild cry of freedom rang in Vik's ears, now that he had crossed the barrier in his heart, had made his final, fatal decision. He

knew with a sense of terror that the brave would double back and make his report to Neshoba, and that only through Rafe's cunning as a scout would they ever gain that precious freedom both wanted so desperately now.

Through leaves and thorns and springy vines and reeds they sped now, unwary of their own physical harm, only that they reach Fort Adams at last. Huge outcroppings of stones impeded their wild flight, hills had to be climbed, streams forded, thickets of briar and vine must be crossed, fields as flat as a table to span and they managed this with the desperation of pursued animals, going until every nerve felt flayed; until they could no longer catch breath; until they fell in their tracks, but go on they did.

Neither pain nor breath, wounds nor hunger, thirst nor privation were important—only life! Freedom!

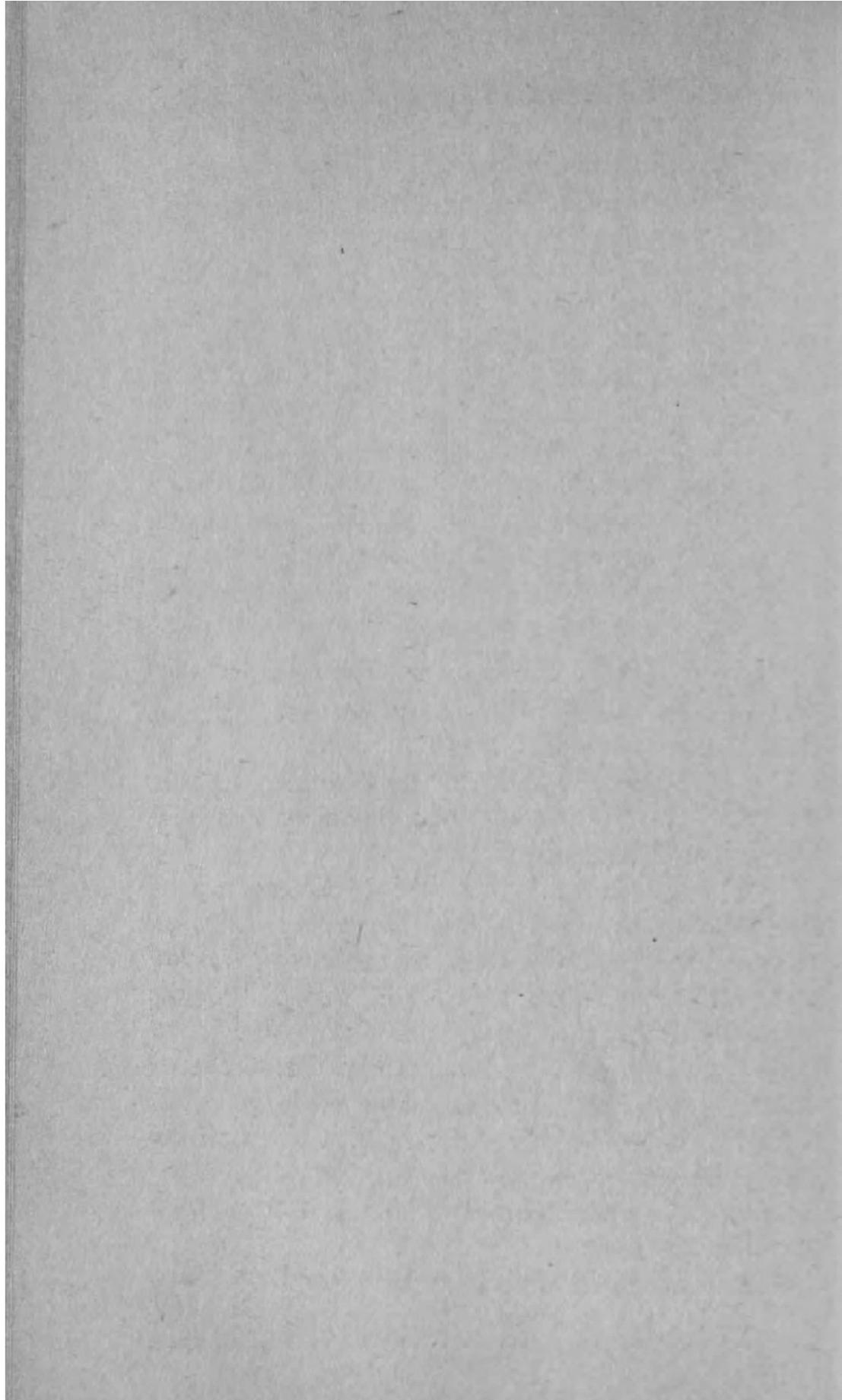
It was theirs, if only they abandoned every emotion, exerted every physical strength, though sodden with fatigue and weariness; it was theirs if they could go on and on, never faltering, never lagging, like the fox before the hounds, never doubling back on their scents, but going, going, going into the wind, into the very face of death.

At last, mercifully, they tore out of the thick woods, climbed a green hill, like Christ, Vik thought, fleetingly, going up the ascent to Calvary. Once at the top they could see Fort Adams. Rafe reassured, urged him on, encouraging, teasing him into super-human effort.

But at the top, weak of breath, drenched in sweat, with limbs a-tremble, they both halted

abruptly, as the apparition ahead stabbed their eyes.

Atop the hill stood Neshoba, his face a mask of murderous rage, a shining knife in one hand, his lethal tomahawk in the other.



Chapter Eleven

“Do I have to kill you a second time, white-dog!” Neshoba bellowed like an ape, as he charged down the hill at Rafe.

“You’ll never kill me the first time, you red bastard!” Rafe shouted back, as they charged together in mortal combat.

Vik’s every nerve stood on edge, demanding of his emotions something for which he was not prepared. Moving away from them, into the shadow of an oak he waited, panting, out of breath, so weary from the long, fear-filled flight he could hardly stand, let alone aid in the struggle. And he wondered frantically how Rafe, in such sodden fatigue, could defend himself against such a warrior as Neshoba—this beautiful savage giant, more beautiful now to Vik than he had ever been before.

With Rafe breaking Neshoba’s hold on him,

both men sprang back. The silence was broken by a bellowing challenge from Neshoba. At the sound of it, Rafe swung to face his foe. The hour had come. The hour had come that came to every man in love, the struggle over the being they lusted for, and both men lusted for Vik.

With a cry that roared from hill to hill and awoke every sleeping animal for miles, Neshoba bared his teeth and made a savage rush forward. His face then, caught up and framed in a wild entanglement of black hair, was a picture of murderous lust. Rafe did not budge. In his own rage he was a frightening image of his ancestors. In determination and, perhaps love, he was more than the Indian's match. Because it was clear that Neshoba, for all his primitive fury, weakened a little after each rush, and fear mixed with rage in his constant bellowing.

Neshoba had never faced an enemy that did not give ground—at least no enemy that walked on legs. But each advance for both men was shorter than the one that proceeded it, and an instant later they became monsters, locked in a death struggle and matched in strength and ferocity. They fought, Vik thought as he trembled for them both, with the deadly singleness of purpose of the wild beasts of the earth. They fought, not to maim or to frighten, but to kill. And Vik, who watched tearfully, sensed that this struggle would see the death of one of them.

Which one?

Inflamed with rage now, masculine rage, the most awesome frenzy of all, they bit into flesh, and the smell of warm blood and the taste of it

redoubled their fury. With grasping feet, with rending hands, with hard fists, with knife and tomahawk, they strove to tear one another limb from limb; to choke breath off, to gouge eyes from their sockets, to strip cheeks from bone like rotten bark from a dying trunk. And to Vik, crouched like a small, defenseless animal, the most terrible thing was not the sight of them but the sound of their voices. It was a sound he knew that impelled all beasts that heard it to flee for their lives. The clearing echoed. With arms and legs flinging, the ground shook, the grass formed waves like a tossing sea, and leaves and twigs came down around them.

It was an awesome sight to Vik, two men in love with him, both lusting for him with a power even he could not gauge, though he had lain with them both, and loved both. Surely one would die because of him, and at this moment, fearing to lose either one of them, they became in his terrified young eyes the most noble of men, the most courageous, the most daring.

They were fighting for their lives but, not so much their lives as their sexual rights to him, the right that to one in death .. would be denied. And in this crucial hour something of the wild savage rose to the surface in Vik, too, some unnamed thing, some primeval fury he never realized he possessed. In that moment he became as the girl of the caves, whose body would be the prize—the victor's spoils. And he waited with bated breath, waited like one from the stone age: rapt, moved, but immobile, almost in a hypnotic trance—a male-woman of stone.

Though it seemed a million years to him, he did not have long to wait.

In one last desperate plunge, his whole body galvanized into the last remaining thread of strength, springing forward with raised tomahawk and a scream so wild it shook the trees, Neshoba buried his feathered weapon in Rafe's bobbing skull.

Vik screamed, then like a savage woman, as Rafe, clutching his head with hands red with his blood, fell face downward into the grass. A hoarse cry of agony burst from his lips-his body thrashing like a freshly-killed chicken for a moment. Now, Rafe lay still his face in the spreading pool of his life's blood, his dark, reckless eyes staring in horror. Vik's hot tears fell as he crouched over Rafe sobbing feebly.

Like a wild man, streaming with sweat, his naked body gleaming like a wet gourd in the light fast-turning to dusk, Neshoba caught Vik roughly by the wrist, dragged him away from the body of Rafe, and faced him toward the walls of Fort Adams far below.

"There is your white man's world!" he screamed in jealous rage, as he pointed a long finger in that direction, still holding Vik in a vise-like grip. "If that is what you want, then go! Go, Sky Eyes, you are free!"

Thwarted now that he was to have neither men, Vik rose to his full height in a last gesture of dignity and gazed sadly down the hill. He could make out movements—activity; armed soldiers in hastily dugout breastworks, cannon, several wagons and horses, a stage, men running

about, dust flying, could hear faint voices. Somehow it meant nothing, it was something alien to him, as alien and unimportant as the Indian encampment when he had first entered it long ago.

"Is that what you want?" Neshoba demanded again and, turning, Vik faced him squarely. Never had the chief looked so magnificent, with his long black hair in wild tangles, his breath heaving, his slick thighs and forearms shining in the late sun. And his eyes, how wild and reckless they shone as they glared down at him in defiance, rage and triumph.

"There is nothing for me here anymore," Vik said faintly in answer, his heart, his mind, his body now drained of all emotion. He did not want to return to the Fort and if he returned to Neshoba he would only be going to added misery and heartbreak for himself—a cold bed in a honeymoon lodge where there could be no more honeymoon.

"You had the world, the universe with me," Neshoba spoke, spreading his hands wide, his knife in one hand, his bloody tomahawk in the other. "I would willingly give you my kingdom. Every bird, every beast, flower would pay homage to you for the love I bore you in my heart. I am a savage, Sky Eyes, But a savage's love is love still, and there is music in my heart."

Vik bent on him a long, sad look. How dark and beautiful he was standing there in the fading light, The stygian shadows of the trees casting strange patterns along his smooth broad shoulders, his heavy thighs. And how terribly sad

to look upon him, wanting him so desperately, yearning with bursting heart, a heart grown wild and unprincipled because of his coldness. How deplorable to lose love, the greatest loss of all.

“Why do you say this now,” he asked, probing for some word, some sign, that would force his love to speak his mind, “why do you speak of love when you have grown so cold, so cruel in your lack of it?”

“Oh, Sky Eyes,” Neshoba muttered, almost shame-faced, his arms still spread, bearing the agony of him nailed to the cross, “the Indian has his laws. Pride in manhood. Pride in bravery. But though the red man is not like the white man in most ways he does share one fault—the grievous fault of jealousy, the rage of it. And I am no different, Sky Eyes. I became blind with rage and jealousy when you lay with Winona, touched her, made love to her. That is why I had to kill her, to render her flesh like stone, to make her ugly and unclean, so that you could never again look upon her as fair and wanted. I did it for you, our love together. I did it to keep you for myself.” He stopped talking, came slowly up the hill to where Vik stood. “It is such an awful thing to be jealous, Sky Eyes, to burn for someone as I burn for you and yet, want to cut out that burning from within you. You betrayed our love, and I wanted to hurt you in some way, as you had hurt me. I wanted you to deny yourself, in my denying you my body, as a punishment, so that without me, my body, my love, you would grow to understand how hard my savage heart hurt, pained, twisted in agony. But I love you

still. You must know that."

"A love without bodily love, without embrace, without sex," Vik grated, defiant as a man who yearns for his own eternal desires. "What kind of love is that, Neshoba? What kind of love would I have if I turned my back to Fort Adams, my white world forever, and came with you?"

"As it was from the very beginning," Neshoba whispered, sinking to his knees, his arms out in the eternal gesture of appeal." To live our love again, from the beginning, moment to moment, moon to moon, darkness to darkness. Riding your pony, hunting, swimming, bathing in the sun, eating, cooking, laughing, weeping, lying with you in the pallet of white feathers, burning your heart with my mouth, burning your loins with my horn, filling you with the honey of my body, taking the honey from yours with my lips, my tongue." He began to moan. "Mischa Mokwa . . Mischa Mokwa! (follow the bear) "Come with me, Sky Eyes, again into the land of the Hiwannee and the Kewanee, be my bride of eternity. Lie with me, love with me, let us devour one another. Let our hearts sing the yearning song of the dove. Let our bodies join like the honeycomb of the bee, waxed together, wrapped in the wet of our tongues like the silken skin of the butterfly. Let our hearts burn like two embers in a fire. Let our loins shiver like wind through the willows. Let us forever go hand in hand, even into the tomb of my ancestors, where surely you will be honored; to lie together, side by side in the burial mounds, in that holy ground of Abba Inca. Come . . . come."

He rose, wiped the blood from his tomahawk and went down the hill and into the dark green oblivion of the trees.

Vik, stunned to silence, his heart pounding, his every nerve vibrating to his awaited fate, considered.

Below lay the white man's world, his world, and for a thoughtful moment he let his mind wander, his childhood, his ambitions for the stage, the glitter, the fancy clothes, the wild parties, the handsome men, the beautiful, desirable women.

Then, he thought of Neshoba, a naked savage. He thought, too, of how clean he had looked at times when coming to him on the white feathery bed with the bluejay pillow, how his freshly-washed body shone all dark, all glowing brown; how his plaited hair looked like oiled leather, how his teeth glittered like shell, religiously cleaned with sassafras twigs; how he had smelled of jasmine, crushed stewartia, of mountain laurel; how he looked naked, savage, but so beautifully savage, and how he had made love, his powerful warmth, his undivided fervor for his small pleasures, his anxious lust, his divine fulfillment, his after limpness, so wonderfully warm in the mansion of his love, so considerate, yet so mysteriously demanding and provocative. No man on earth, white man, red man, civilized or savage, did such things without loving to distraction.

Vik glanced once more toward Fort Adams, shed a dry tear for half of his life he had won and lost there. Then, obedient as a squaw, he turned,

and without looking back, followed Neshoba into the dark wilderness.

..... The End

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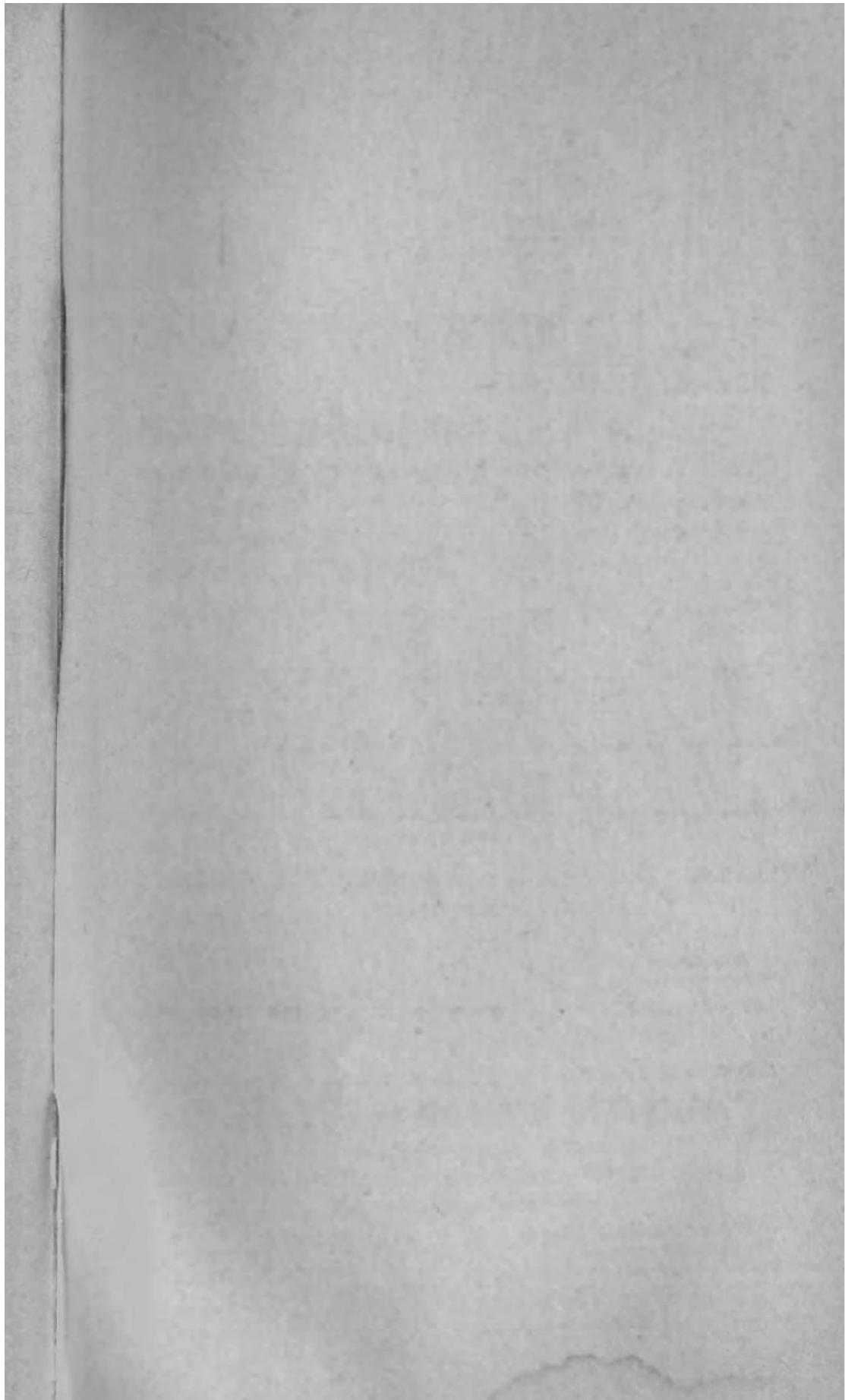
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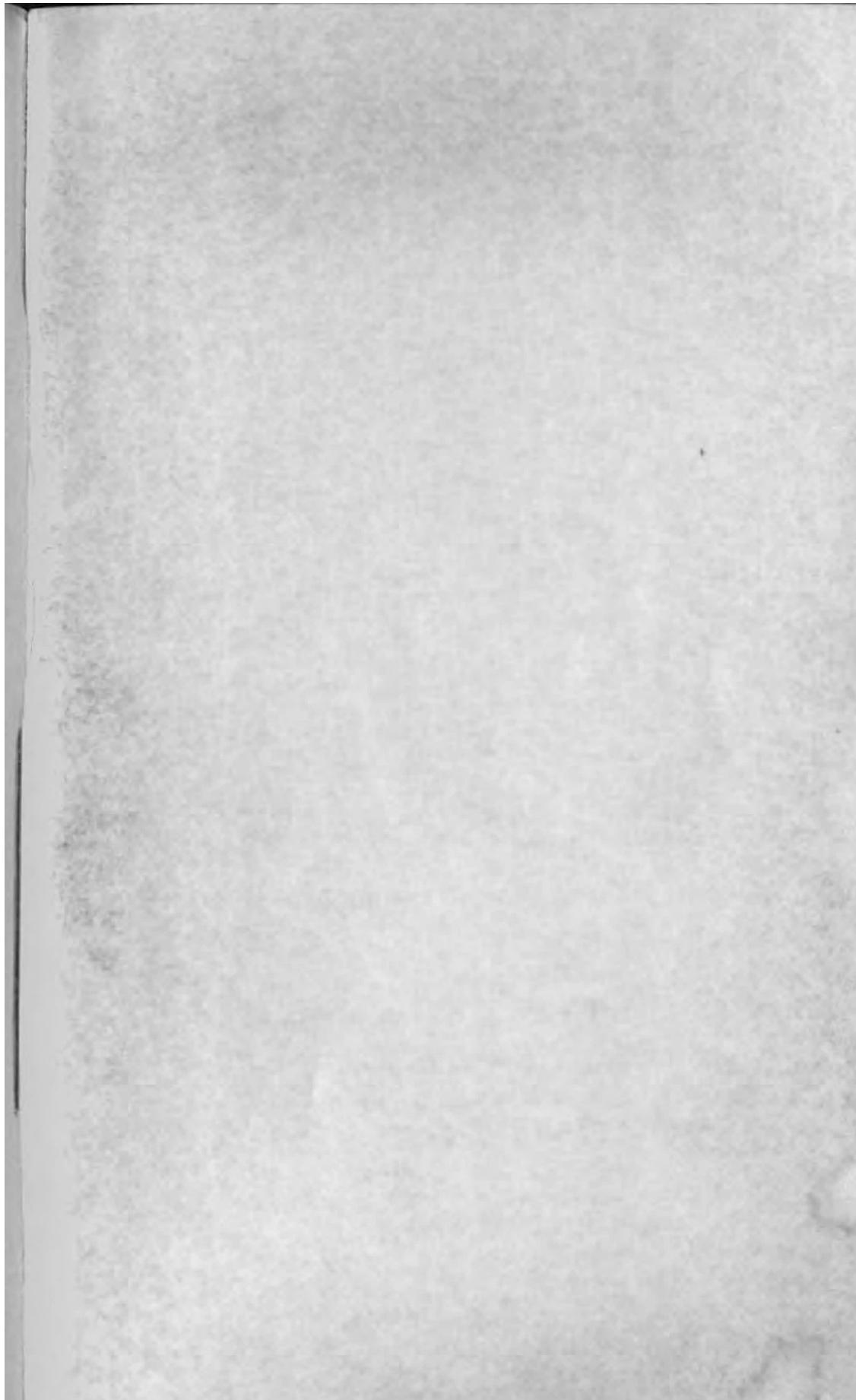
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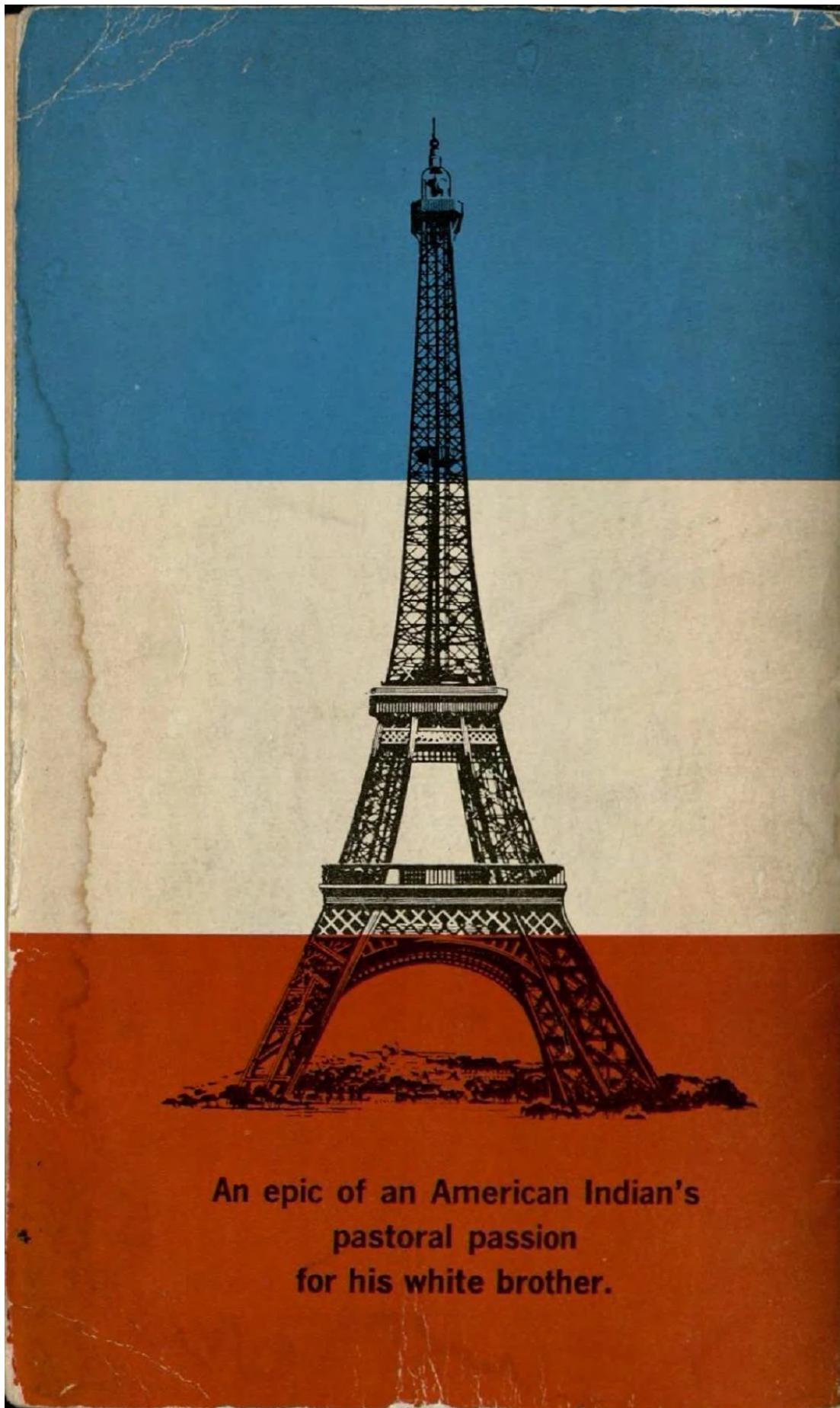
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